Umarekawaru

by Hikiri

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Summary: "The sun dying our hearts is eternal, so just believe in our bonds." After watching over a fatally wounded Hijikata, Chizuru loses control of her Oni abilities, sending the Shinsengumi forward into a new era where they must band together and face new trials. Umarekawaru - to be reborn. Saito/OC - Okita/OC. AU.

1. Prologue: A Use Of Power

A/N-

**This is the prologue as it stats, just a taste...that said, I do not own anything to do with Hakouoki though the original characters are mine. **

please enjoy as the story progresses. Thanks.

* * *

><p>Prologue<p>

~A Use of Power~

"Hijikata-san? Hijikata-san?!" She was trying to stop the blood. Death was a force to be reckoned with though and the stream poured forth from paling skin unceasingly. Chizuru unsheathed her short sword and sliced deeply into her own flesh. "Just a little bit Hijikata-san. Drink just a little even!"

But her frantic voice fell on deaf ears and the blood from her wound merely slid from the lips of the man lying in her lap. She began to cry, ghosts of memories passing through her mind as she cradled the now cold head in her arms. _Hijikata-san, Okita-san, Sannan-san, Shinpachi-san, Harada-san, Saito-san, Heisuke-kun. Everyone!_ With each name came a vision of a smiling face as the girl cycled her thoughts around her lost and dead friends.

_So many things have happened...I can't let them go! _And with that thought something seemed to twitch deep inside Chizuru. A nameless power, brought forth by her Oni heritage, surged around her, pulsing forth and back between this realm and that of ghosts and dreams.

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><p>Kazama opened his eyes breifly from where he was lying ten feet from the sakura blossoms surrounding Hakuouki and Chizuru when he felt a surge of...something pulsating from their direction. To his chargin, though, the space was empty. He smirked, "She's done it now." He mumbled incoherently before passing out to let his Oni blood heal his devastating wounds as quickly as possible.<p>

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><p>One by one seven souls heard their names called from beyond the veil. They had been scattered upon death, mere consciousness in a sea of likewise beings. It was boring and lonely. One by one seven souls burned brightly as they answered that anguished call.<p>

Time to go home...to where the heart is.

2. Bonds: Where The Heart Is

Chapter 1

~Bonds; Where The Heart Is~

It was a normal enough Saturday in the Greece Ridge Mall, well except that it was close to Christmas so there was a screaming child in Santa's lap and there was as much breathing room as a can of tuna. Not all that unique though considering the holiday. I don't think anything could have been more boring, sitting there waiting for the two friends I came to this death trap with in the food court. It was a normal, boring saturday.

Ya...right.

Suddenly the air compressed, or that's how it felt. My head began to ache and my ears popped and lightening seemed to crackle next to the wall adjacent to the Burger King. Nobody else in the packed food court seemed to notice though and the only thing I could think was, _Great...and I'm not even _on_ drugs._

The lightening stopped randomly and standing in its place were eight strangely familiar looking people all looking bewildered and slightly put off. People could see them though, so I knew I wasn't going crazy. What followed was about ten amusing minutes of watching a gaggle of twenty or so girls of various attractiveness gathered around the group, some staring others trying to flirt.

I wonder if they even speak english...

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><p>Chizuru felt as though her body had been through a meat grinder as she opened her eyes to the most unusual sight she had ever seen.

It was after dark, but the place she was in was as bright as daylight without any candles. Little suns in glass bulbs lit the giant building she stood in, the roof way high up above her head.<p>

A golden tiered structure was slowly rotating with what looked like horses bobbbing up and down on poles and the air smelled of many wonderous foods. And the people. There were so many. Beside her stood seven men. Seven very alive men. As they stood there, staring around them garnering attention, the Oni female noticed they were all wearing very strange clothing. So were all the people. Women walked about with pants or skirts of various lengths and she couldn't help but blush at how short one of the girls walking past's skirt was.

"Not much left to the imagination..." Hijikata-san muttered.

"Neh neh, what is tha..." Heisuke began excitedly but a sudden feeling coming over him, as it did the rest of them, stopped the question in its tracks.

Information flew into her mind at a rapid pace, history, laws, vast amounts of technology. Languages. As she learned it seemed she always knew it.

By the time the Recall ended a fair number of girls were gathered around the men in her group and, startled, she hid behind Hijikata-san.

"Hey there, I like your hair." The girl was mildly to his tastes but her clothing didn't really clothe much so he just kinda ignored her. Until she asked, "Is that a real sword?"

As Saito opened his mouth to reply a muscle bound man walked up, a vein in his bald head twitching slightly. "Hey! You hittin' on my woman?"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Saito responded calmly.

"What? You don't think she's good enough for a pretty boy like you?" The man asked unreasonably.

"First your mad that I might be hitting on her, and now your mad that I might not be attracted to her?"

"Why you little..." The bald man cocked his fist back and made to slam it into Saito's face, who already had his hand on the hilt of his sword. All of a sudden a streak of red and black barreled in front of the fist and clasped a hand on Saito's, holding his katana to its sheath. The interferer caught the other man's hand before it could land a punch on anyone.

* * *

><p>Looking up from the floor a pixie sized girl with long black hair and green eyes gazed first at Saito and then to the rest of the people who had suddenly appeared in the mall in a way that only she had seen.<p>

Shit! I had been watching the developement of a man trying to defend his girlfriends honor against one of the men. When the burly

baldy cocked his fist some people in the crowd shifted and I saw his target. And his target's hand on the hilt of a sword.

I was up in a flash. Barreling past the girls who stood watching, I reached the situation just in time to stop the purple haired man's quick draw and the fist coming crashing at my face.

Looking up at the people I couldn't believe were really there I devised a plan, a bloodshed free plan, to get them out of there and away from prying eyes. There was no doubt in my mind at this point. I was looking at the Shinsengumi from the days of the Japanese Civil War in the late 1800s. Behind one of them I saw the Oni girl from the anime I had watched about this group, and knew that they were here due to her.

At least that means I know their names.

"Saito! There you are," I couldn't help but smile at his confusion, thinking the whole time, _Play along, play along, for God's sake play along._ I began to address the other Shinsengumi asking how they were and slowly edging Saito towards them. I tried to ignore the spiteful glares all the girls were giving me, but it wasn't the easiest thing. "Don't draw." I commanded quietly. "No matter what."

"Hey you...trash!" A stunning beach blonde tramp in an abercrombie blouse dress and slid on stilettos called out. _Oh boy...Wait, she knows its winter right?_

Plastering on a smile that screamed 'I'm going to slit your throat,' I turned to look at her, hands on her hips while she held her eye brows raised. "May I help you?"

"You don't really know them do you?" The way her words dripped with the condescending necter only this level of arrogant flower could produce made my skin crawl but I decided to have fun with it.

"Oh of course not...I mean, Saito was a lucky guess, as were all the other names i threw out there. How common right?" My sarcasm seemed to wither her roots a bit but she kept going.

"Uhuh, and if you know each other whats her name then?" The blonde looked to the sword weilders while pointing at me and, by the grace of some god I don't even know, my two best friends popped out of the crowd with the timing of little angels.

"Her name is Ryane." One of them, Cat, snapped at the girl, her ebony fingers flashing in an arc over the girls head. She pushed past the antagonist making sure to get in her face a little. "Excuse you. Got an eye problem or something."

"Stop acting stereotypical Neko Neko, these girls today can't help it." My other friend said with a long put on sigh. "We have places to be."

"I was asking _them_." The chick just wouldn't give up.

"Why?" Cat barked with a laugh. "You don't think little old her could be dangerous to these guys do you?" When the girl blushed a bit Cat crowed. "Really? Really? And you think you could defend them better then they could themselves? They have swords you idiot...what you

gonna blind her with that mop of chemically altered hair of yours? Or maybe give her a seizure or something smiling and then closing those silicon lips of yours to let your teeth strobe light a bit. Knock her out with that bleach scent of yours...Do you bathe in that shit or is it just all the fake in you oozin out of your pores?"

"I think its time to leave..." I muttered, grabbing two of the Shinsengumi by the wrists and pulling towards the door. "Cat, get to the car."

"With all due respect, eight people won't fit in any car you could possibly drive."

"Well its a good thing its not a car, then isn't it!" Cat called from behind us.

And so I hauled two of them while the rest followed close behind across the parking lot and to the very back where stood our ride. In all its short bus glory.

"This is your vehicle?" Sannan asked, pushing his glasses a bit up his nose.

"Yahuh. You just get on in and get comfy."

As the Shinsengumi climbed in, me, Cat and our other friend Shukke hung back to share info.

"So," Cat asked quietly, "who are your friends?"

"Cosplayers, probably," Shukke answered for me. "Why are we helping them."

"They are not cosplayers." I explained the group's bizarre entrance and my theory on how they got here. "We didn't need bloodshed."

"Aw but bloodshed is fun!" One of the Shinsengumi, Souji Okita called down from the window he had just opened above our heads.

"Its against the law you idiot!" Another, Toshizo Hijikata's growl came through pretty clearly from across the seats.

"When has that stopped us before?" The youngest member, Heisuke Todo barked out playfully.

"The situation is hardly the same," Hajime Saito reminded, we could hear him unsheath his katana where he sat in the back... my seat, "The way of the sword is no more either way." He stated before sliding his weapon home.

"He sounds so sad," Shukke pouted.

"Of course he is!" Sanosuke Harada practically shouted.

"It was our way of life, you see..." Shinpachi Nagakura explained. "All we really knew and all."

"Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wait..." Cat interrupted as Shukke nodded her understanding. "You're buying this shit? How the hell do ancient warriors show up out of nowhere, countries away from their origin,

able to speak the language and dressed in modern clothes with swords? Nuh-uh. No way. I call bullshit. Bullshit!"

"You don't watch the shows we tell you to, do you?" I asked, a little pissed.

"Well no. As a matter of fact I don't!" Cat stuck her tongue out at me as if to prove a point.

"Then you don't know that the girl, Chizuru, is an Oni and probably got them here. Unless you want to explain it as a mad science experiment gone wrong from some other country." At the look of utter confusion on my anime illiterate friend's face I just huffed and motioned her bus-ward. "Whatever, lets just go for now."

"You want me to get in the bus with a bunch of random men with swords? They'll kill us all!"

"Oh spare me the hysterics Cat." I gruffed out.

"Just think," Shukke said cheerful as she climbed in, "At least you'll see the instrument of your demise and the way its coming at you...Can't do that with bullets."

Cat stomped onto the ride with a "Fine, but your driving Ryane!" and we were on our way.

* * *

><p>I parked on the lawn behind the house Shukke, Cat and I rented and opened the bus door for some very relieved Shinsengumi. "I thought we were gonna die!" Heisuke groaned.<p>

"My drivings not that bad," I swatted at him, catching his long light brown ponytail and flipping it into his face. "I thought you had short hair in the second season." I pointed out.

"I had short hair when I died...Must have grown back."

"D-d-d-di-d-d-died" Cat took a step back, frightened.

"You _really_ need to watch that show."

"I am guessing the resurrection brought us back how we viewed ourselves as spiritual entities." Saito ran slender fingers through his low side ponytail as he spoke.

Cat crept over to Sanosuke and poked his broad shoulder.

"Boo!" He grinned at her, laughing as she flinched.

Sannan adjusted his glasses and looked over to our house skeptically. "Are you sure there is room?" He asked dubiously.

"Ya, should be fine."

"Wait..." Cat grabbed me by the arm and pulled me a bit aways from the group. "Sidebar!" she yelled. "They are staying with us?"

Motioning Shukke over I nodded. "Why else would I drive home?"

"I don't see an issue..." Shukke commented calmly. "We have tons of extra space, and we can't just _leave_ them somewhere. Can you imagine the headlines?"

"I don't want to think about headlines if they are staying with us!" Cat yelped.

"Poor scaredy Neko." Shukke coo'd with a shrug.

"You know, Cat..." I said softly, "If you give them a chance you might even like them."

"You know what...fine, if we voted I would lose so fine. If I get killed I am haunting _you_."

All of a sudden Shukke took a wildly vibrating phone from her pocket and checked the alarm that was going off. Clearing her throat she looked at me and said "Umm, Kiri-nee?"

I looked at the time she was showing me and swore inventivly. "Fuck I'm gonna be late!" Dashing to the door I shot over my shoulder, "Make yourselves at home...shit I'm gonna be late."

The last thing I heard before throwing myself through the door and up to my room was Shukke laughing uncontrollably.

* * *

><p>"Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysor rysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrys orrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorr ysorrysorrysorrysorrysorryso rrysorry!" I must have said that word fifteen times a second into the microphone attached to my computer as I logged into World of Warcraft, my personal crack, and accepted a raid invite.<p>

Because the content was so familiar to our raid group we finished in about two hours leaving everyone able to do as they pleased. And me to get grilled by the officers.

"So," Oltes, the guild leader, began. "Did you have a date or something Hikiri?" My ingame name, "Your gonna make Ruldy jealous..."

"That joke never gets old..." Ruldy interjected with casual sarcasm.

"Me and the roomies went christmas shopping and...ran into some people. They'll be staying at the house for a bit so its gonna be crowded."

"Shukke taking in strays again? Or was it that other one's idea?"

"Mine." I admitted.

"O-ho, Miss Isolate has friends?"

I pushed my button down to talk but was interrupted by a voice behind

me, "If thats what we are." I looked over my shoulder and saw Saito leaning in slightly, a small smile on his face. "So this is where you've run to hide."

"Oh he sounds hot..." One of the female officers interjected.

"You should let me thank her." Saito said, still smiling, as he realized I wasn't going to push my talk button. But when I did so Shinpachi yelled from the hallway, "Oh but he is."

Still holding the button down I announced, "Facepalm!"

"Did he sound 'hot' too?" Heisuke called out.

"Little kids should stay quiet!" Sanosuke snorted.

"Oh my God," The same female officer shouted, "Orgy at Hikiri's house?"

"No," I protested.

"Ya deffinatly not," She snarked.

"Get off my ass." I retorted.

"Ha, I'm sure one of those guys would be happy to get on it for you though."

"Not everyone is a whore like you." I reminded rudely.

"Ya, not everyone is as good looking either." She snipped.

"I think Ryane is plenty attractive," Saito input, to which a couple of the others amiably agreed.

"You're not helping." I informed him, annoyed.

"Dee thats enough, Hikiri chill." Oltes commanded.

"Yes sir." I grumbled. "At the risk of a further onslaught I am going to log now and hang out with the company." And before Dee could make any comments I logged off the voice service and WoW before turning to my guests and muttered, "Thanks for trying."

"Eh." Was the only reply I got.

"Where are the others?" I asked counting four out of the eight.

"Chizuru is helping one of your room mates cook..." Heisuke offered.

"Sannan is flipping light switches and checking out the T.V." Shinpachi announced with a grin.

"I think Toshi is still reading one of your books." Saito added.

"And Okita is harassing the scared one." Sanosuke finished.

Harrassing the scared one... I heard a scream and ran as fast as I could down the hall to Cat's room. As I burst through the door I saw Souji Okita pinning a spider with his sword. I hadn't laughed so hard in weeks. "Cat...Cat...Cat," I wheezed, "Was it the sword or the spider?"

"She was pointing and screaming so i killed it..." Souji said matter of factly.

"With a sword." I pointed out. "You coulda stepped on it you know."

"Where's the fun in that?" He grinned.

I opened my mouth to inform him of where he could shove his fun, but the air I had built up was let out in a gusty huff as the lights flickered off.

"What the hell happened to the lights!" Heisuke called from to my right.

"Sorry!" I heard a voice call with the echo of a basement. _Oh he did NOT just flip the breaker. Damn curious ancient science enthused samurai. _ "I don't know what I flipped but I can figure it out soon."

"Did I just hear him add 'I hope'?" Okita sounded like he was grinning as I flew down the stairs to stop Sannan from flipping any more switches.

"Leave it till morning," I barked at the bespectacled man. "Right now we should all just go to sleep." To emphasize this I yawned widely as we walked up the first set of stairs, meeting Shukke and Chizuru with candles in hand.

"Bed sounds good." Shukke yawned too. "Where are we putting everyone?"

"I'm gonna grab the extra blankets from the closet upstairs just tell anyone you find to select a patch of floor where ever they find some."

"Alright."

As I came down the stairs with an armful of thick blankets I heard Shukke give the order. But then she had to add, "Lucky two get the couch!" Swords were out of sheaths in a flash.

"Shukke," I warned. "That is _not_ a good idea."

"Your right," She admitted. "Forgot about the swords."

"How?" Came Cat's quivering voice from the back of the room. "You know what...fuck this." Cat gathered her strength and shouted as loud as she could, "Chizuru gets the little couch the rest of you on the _floor_!"

The samurai were all so shocked at the 'scared one' yelling that they complied without complaint. The small girl smiled her thanks before

grabbing a blanket and laying down on the little couch.

3. Plans: The Best Laid of Mice and Men

A/N:

Thank you for all the reviews, it makes me want to work on this more and more. As for the deaths of characters that didn't actually die, i apologize for going against the story, and also really apologize for last chapters many typos and errors. I hadn't been working with a word processor with a spell check so it kinda showed. Should be better now!

Chapter 2

~Plans; The Best Laid of Mice and Men~

Everyone had found floor space and gone to bed when I finally got to lie down in my bed, intent on a quick route to dreamland. But when I placed my head on my under-stuffed pillow I heard unfamiliar footsteps coming up the stairs my room was at the head of. A soft knock had me propped up on an elbow before I called out to the closed door. "Come in Saito."

A purple haired head poked through the freshly opened door with a small, tentative grin. "How'd you know it was me?"

"I think you're the only one who would knock...well besides Hijikata but he would have brought Chizuru and I only heard one set of footsteps on the stairs." Sitting up fully I asked, "What can I do for you?"

"Well," he hesitated for a brief second before continuing. "They are pretty loud sleepers and there isn't much space downstairs...So I was hoping I could procure a spot on your floor for the time being."

"I don't see why not, just try not to broadcast to the world that it's quiet up here."

"Thank you Bell-san." He murmured.

"Please call me something that makes me sound less old though..."

"Then Ry-chan, if you prefer." He said after some thought.

"Thank you Saito."

"You may also use something more familiar if you like." He offered with another small smile.

"Hajime would work?" I asked hesitantly.

"That it would." And with that Saito...Hajime wrapped himself in a blanket and leaned against the corner adjacent to my bed, close enough that we could continue talking. "Sorry about your lights," He said quietly. "Hijikata is having a fit."

"It's easily fixed in the morning and it was getting about time to

sleep anyway." I soothed. After a moment of silence I asked, "Do you miss it?"

"Miss what...the lights?"

"No!" I huffed. "Your home, your time."

"It was simpler then." He admitted. "I miss that at least. Even how, walking down the streets in Kyoto, I was guarded only by my sword," I could hear him pat the hilt of his sword leaning against him, "And my ideals.

"I miss the simple entertainment of going to Shimabara in the red light district to gaze at the beautiful women. There wasn't the overt selling of one's body and women weren't subjected to the incredibly base acts that are so common in your time." Here he paused while I recalled the ride home, when Cat had made a simple 'that's what she said' joke about oral sex, and after the time it took to explain the context of 'that's what she said', the look of disgust on Saito's face.

"But have you ever...well..."

"With a couple different women." He admitted without me having to be so bold. "You have not." It wasn't in question form. "I hope you find someone you love to teach you what it's like. I hear its best with the one you love."

"You've never fallen in love?" I asked, indignant somehow.

"Not to that point no." The silence lasted and stretched for several minutes before he abruptly, but kindly whispered "Goodnight Ry-chan."

"Goodnight Hajime." _I hope you fall in love one day._

* * *

><p>I estimated having gotten two and a half hours sleep before the door to my bedroom slammed against the wall, waking me from a rather peaceful rest. Slightly disoriented by the dawn sun gracing light upon the figure in the corner across from me, I was surprised to note that Hajime was still asleep. Then, as if sensing my eyes on him, his cracked open for a split second, his breathing still slow and even as if he were sleeping.<p>

Directing my attention to the threshold, where in stood two very excited Shinsengumi, I found myself holding in a bit of a laugh. Hair disheveled and the knit pattern from the blanket he had slept in marking grooves on his face, Heisuke stood just in front of a flushed and panting Shinpachi, I could hear a third member shifting from foot to foot just beyond the doorway.

"Saito's in here right?" The youngest member blurted out in a rush.

The man in question shifted a bit and peered around the corner separating him from his comrades. "What is it Heisuke, Shinpachi?"

"He's all excited 'cause Hijikata gave us permission." Shinpachi announced with a grin.

"Permission?" I asked, concerned at the mischief glinting in the two men's eyes.

"Where?" Saito asked calmly.

"A park about two miles away!" Heisuke reported.

"Um..." I tried to get their attention but was completely ignored.

"And the crowd?"

"People our age."

"We should hurry." Saito declared as he stood and fixed his sword to his belt. Sighing at the lack of attention I was receiving I got up and followed them right out the front door.

The two mile walk to Genesee Valley Park was silent, though I was bursting with questions. All eight of the guests along with Shukke, Cat and myself were there, snow crunching under our feet. What looked like a festival was going on at the park and people were everywhere.

As we walked further into the crowd I began to feel worse and worse about this. People of all ages were dressed in martial arts uniforms, a sharp and distinct contrast to the jeans and plain tees the Shinsengumi had appeared in. It was only when we approached a booth labeled 'Registration' that I got the full picture.

"What event?" The bored, almost monotone voice asked from the booth.

"Sword for seven different members." Hijikata announced calmly.

"What dojo?" The still monotone voice asked.

"Unaffiliated."

"Please fill out the forms." Seven clipboards were passed out. Peering over one of their shoulders I saw most of the information provided were lies. Which it had to be, but at least their lies corresponded with each other's.

Once the forms, with their cleverly uniform lies, were completed and exchanged for numbered armbands Hijikata steered us aways away to explain what was going on.

"We realized," He began once we had some relative privacy, "When we got to your house that we have nothing but the clothes on our backs and one other thing and no money to buy more. That's when Sannan-san turned on the TV and news flashed across the screen of this competition. Top three placements get cash prizes. When we get all three places that will be eighteen hundred dollars towards whatever we need."

Letting the gratitude of not having to pay for new clothes for the Shinsengumi sink in, I asked, "What was the one other thing you came with?"

"These-" Saito said with a small satisfied grin, and they each pulled on a white and blue haori.

The Shinsengumi uniform. I stared as they all straightened their old uniforms... getting ready for battle. Shortly there-after Hijikata and Sano walked off to 'scope out the competition' leaving the rest of us to do as we please. This roughly translated into 'receiving stares and glares'.

Hajime, Heisuke, Shukke and I drifted to the stage constructed for the event, passing a dojo of swordsmen along the way. As they stretched Saito stared with a small hint of amusement and poorly hidden disgust.

"Hey, what's your problem man?" The boy was around Hajime's age, with a buzz cut and a scar on his chin.

"Nothing, nothing." Hajime demurred. "Just wondering why swordsmen are stretching like ballerinas." The whole dojo sparked with rage as he turned and began to walk away.

"What was that?" I asked, angry.

"Their anger might make them fight better," He explained without turning to me. "It will be a poor duel if not." And because Shukke nodded acceptingly and Heisuke didn't look bothered by the exchange to begin with, I let it go with a sigh.

Several events went by before the call for swordsmen to get ready went up.

"We'll be here." I assured the two contestants before they went off to stage left to receive the wooden swords the event was providing. There were some twenty participants so the first two duels, by luck, didn't have any Shinsengumi and because I wasn't well versed in the art I wasn't sure how the competitors were, though I clapped enthusiastically enough.

"Next up: Tom Maronelli against Heisuke Todo." Except the guy pronounced it He-is-sook To-do, which seemed to tick the young samurai off because he shouted the correction amongst the laughs the mispronunciation brought.

The look of scorn on his face was clear as Tom took in the young, slight appearance of his opponent, but Heisuke just gave a single snort before composing himself and slowly and continuously moved his sword around and around, serpentinly. Tom looked confused and relaxed his stance as Heisuke continued with what was called a 'wagtail sword' which was confusing the other contestants as well, causing the Shinsengumi no small amount of amusement.

All of a sudden, long hair flowing behind him, Heisuke switched to the offensive, slamming his sword down over his opponents right shoulder so hard that when Tom raised his weapon to block he was knocked head over heels across the platform, landing heavily on his

back. Tom lay there as Heisuke tapped his own shoulder with the back of his weapon, hand on hip and grinning cheekily.

Heisuke walked purposefully over to his prone victim and placed his sword under the man's chin. "Yield." He commanded, to which Tom lifted his weaponless hands in the air.

"Winner!" It was announced to the stunned and tittering crowd. "Heisuke Todo!" This time, the announcer was very careful with his pronunciation. The matches went by in similar fashion from then on with the Shinsengumi starting off with the Wagtail Sword to confuse their opponent as to which side they would be attacking from, and then knocking the other participant across the stage.

When Hijikata was called forth, the man he was facing pulled on his hair which seemed to unleash some hidden demon, like he had turned into a rasetsu, as if the Ochimizu hadn't burned out of his veins when Chizuru brought them forward. The offender was still knocked out from the blow Hijikata landed on his head by the time the competition was over.

After the third Shinsengumi, the girls in the crowd had stopped tittering and cat calling at the hot men in casual jeans and matching haori, but when the last match was announced I don't think they could have really help themselves.

"Max Chark against Souji Okita!" Souji had such a look of cocky confidence on his face that I burst out laughing, earning a cold glare from the girl on my right. It seemed that that look was making the girls go wild, or it might have been that he had taken his shirt off and stood in the freezing air with just his jeans and the haori. It could have been either...or both, but because of that light blue and white haori they all knew he was strong. Max Chark looked ready to piss himself.

Souji didn't start with the Wagtail Sword. He merely stood sword held high, horizontally across his face, expression never wavering. Max watched him stand at the ready for a solid minute before letting out a cry and charging the samurai, sword held high above his head.

As Max reached him and began to bring his weapon down, Souji just pulled his sword back, flipped it and slammed it into the man's gut without moving his feet once. Max doubled over and Souji mercilessly drove his wooden blade down onto the man's shoulders just below the base of his neck. Max did not get up.

Finally moving his feet Okita turned to the crowd and spotted us in the front row. Seeing the terrified expression on Cat's face he gave her a reassuring grin and winked causing another craze amongst the girls surrounding us. Cat just scowled.

Semi-finals were just as smooth for the first two duels. Hijikata won against a beefy looking crowd favorite in three passes and the other was a dull match between two non-Shinsengumi.

"Next match-" came the announcement, "Shinpachi Nagakura against Sanosuke Harada."

"Yo, Harada." Shinpachi called as they both began with their Wagtails. "Kinda missing that spear of yours right now, huh?"

"You wish," Harada sneered playfully. "My swordsmanship is more than enough to take you out." And with that Sanosuke charged Shinpachi and the near constant clack of their wooden weapons causing echoes through the snow covered park.

Their swords came together a final time and they circled around, weapons pressed together. Pushing away they lunged at one another and before Harada's blade made contact Shinpachi had his positioned at his friend's throat.

"Winner!" The announcer shouted to the stunned and quiet onlookers. "Shinpachi Nagakura." The crowd broke out in cheers, amazed by what they had seen, excited for what was next.

"Next match!" The crowd stilled and waited on bated breath. "Souji Okita against Heisuke Todo!"

"Aww, I gotta go against the little guy?" Okita teased. "At least beat Hijikata first Heisuke-kun."

"Oh I'm gonna beat your tail Souji!" Okita's smirk just deepened as he took a step back. Both men positioned their swords for lunges. Okita held his arm cross wise to his sideways blade, his smirk transforming to a feral snarl.

With a fierce yell from both of their mouths, the samurai moved in unison, wooden swords a blur. Heisuke saw that the older Shinsengumi's blade would strike home while his would not, so he bailed- twirling out of reach of the blow aimed for his heart. Souji turned his strike into a sweeping blow that barely missed Heisuke, brushing against the young man's ponytail.

"Coward!" He sneered distasteful of the maneuver.

"Nothing cowardly about surviving."

"These aren't real swords." Okita snorted derisively. "And you're only delaying the inevitable. I've killed way more people then you." The crowd shifted nervously at that, and began to murmur uncomfortably.

"Ya, video games don't count for anything." Heisuke countered smoothly, bringing Okita back to the current situation, where talk of killing was not the most appropriate or wisest thing. The people watching relaxed considerably.

Embarrassed Okita drove himself into a flurry of movement, pushing Heisuke to the defensive. Their swords met and as green eyes met blue Heisuke found himself being pushed back as he dug his heels in in an attempt to stop his movement. Okita used his superior strength to sweep back the shocked younger man's sword and while Heisuke's stance was broken and his balance temporarily skewed Okita brought his sword around and slammed it into the side of his opponent's neck in a blow that would have severed his head.

"Winner! Souji Okita!" Could barely be heard above the crowds' cheers.

After that display the last match of the semi-finals seemed

lackluster and not many people even watched as Saito finished off Sannan, who didn't seem to be all in. Saito seemed to be holding back, he was way better in the anime.

"The finals will be held after a five minute break. It will be a seven way battle royale between Toshizo Hijikata, Shinpachi Nagakura, Hajime Saito, Souji Okita, Bryan O'tell, Ken Kepirtzchy and last year's champion, Jack Hemot. Please be ready in five."

Well this'll be interesting.

4. Battle Royale: Flashing Blades

**A/N: **

K so I won't be writing much this coming week, MoP came out so I have to level to 90 and be raid ready before next tuesday...bleh. Glad you all are enjoying still, and thanks x1000 to 14Phantom for pointing out my stories flaws, its helpful! I realize I haven't said so yet (Thought it was pretty obvious) but I don't on anything Hakuouki related. Just the OCs. Without further ado though:

Chapter 3

~Battle Royale; Flashing Blades~

Five minutes went by in a few failed attempts to reach the Shinsengumi and a flurry of outstretched female arms. _So many girls!_

Okita had a throng of about twelve, which he seemed to be managing with the ease of a practiced playboy. Shinpachi and Harada were back to back with four and five girls each and Heisuke looked overwhelmed with a ring of teeny boppers surrounding him. Surprisingly enough Hijikata had no-one around him and in fact a good few feet in all directions of free space. Well it was only a surprise until I caught a look at the deadly scowl on his face.

Sannan was favorited by a couple bespectacled girls, one in braided pigtails the other with dreads and both were chatting animatedly at him and more often with each other. Hajime had three pretty girls vying for his attention, one with long, dyed red hair and a beauty mark penned in above her lip was pressing against his arm, which was actually quite humorous because the few times he paid attention to her, or either of the other girls, he looked rather unimpressed.

With about a minute to spare a familiar face managed to press his way through the ebb and flow of girls to Saito. Buzz Cut walked right up to the samurai and announced haughtily, "For all that arrogance of yours, you're the weakest one in the semi-finals. Ballerinas my ass, you're so dead."

Saito looked at the boy dead in the eye and smile softly. "I have heard that from fighters much more competent than you could ever be, and they ended up at my feet. Any of us wearing this haori could take you on in our sleep, one-armed."

"Pfft, that match with you and four eyes was pathetic. I could beat you bare-handed." Buzz Cut fired back.

"Ah, yesâ€¦not my proudest moment." Saito agreed amiably. "But Sannan and I have a bet." His eyes slid meaningfully to Souji who was busy entertaining the girls.

"There's no way you can take him." Buzz Cut snarked.

"You'd be surprised how close he's come." Okita commented without looking up from the girls still trying to keep his attention. "Even though I am still the best of us, Saito _is _a master swordsman. I figured something was up with you and Sannan, Saito. You're not preforming at top level. At first I thought you got rusty somehow. What did you guys bet? Not the winnings I hope."

"No." Sannan announced with an adjustment of his glasses as he delicately pushed away from the girls before him with a kindly and slightly amused smile. With a hasty look to Hijikata the Colonel of the Shinsengumi explained what was at stake. "I bet him the purchase of an extra shirt." Reaching out he caught a small white flurry on his finger and his smile deepened. "Snow's here boys. Just in time for that thing they call a battle."

Cat and I rejoined Shukke and the Oni girl where they stood, saving our spots in front just to the left of stage center right before the crowd lunged forward at the raised platform. Arms thrusting in the air as six of the seven contestants walked to form a half circle around the announcer, girls of all ages went pretty much insane. It was kind of like being at a rock concert.

One of them clocked me in the back of the head in their frenzy, but when I looked back at the mass no one tendered an apology. It was difficult to hear the announcer doing his job, but you could certainly tell when one of the Shinsengumi was called. _So loud!_

Somehow in the confusion Heisuke, Harada, and Sannan had managed to push their way through to stand with us, though I can't say I was grateful to that. The girls who had been hounding them during the break were piled with them and making an awful racket.

"â€¦and finally, last year's champion: Jack Hemot!" The last contestant strode confidently to the stage, sparing a glare at Saito before taking his place at the left end of the half circle. Snow was catching in his buzz cut and he rubbed at his scar before settling into a stance.

The snow began to pick up as the announcer called for the match to begin, the wind blowing motes of frozen white around the stage as seven feet jumped back and seven swords began to move. The four Shinsengumi stood back to back forming a terrifying square.

Shinpachi parried an attack from the black and yellow garbed Ken Kepirtzchy before leaping forward to slam his blade into the man's solar plexus. Pulling back to the square formation he chuckled. "Well this brings back memories."

"The Choshu were much more of a formidable enemy then these pathetic

excuses for warriors." Okita barked back with a laugh.

"Watch it you idiot!" Hijikata ordered while slashing at O'tell who had just lunged at him, though to anyone watching he could have been demanding Souji to pay attention to the match rather than to what he said in public. The blow hit the man in maroon and gray on his left side, just below the ribs.

"Dibs on Hemot." Saito declared suddenly, breaking formation and standing before the previous year's champion sword at the ready.

"You sure about that Saito?" Hijikata called with a smile. At Hajime's nod he just huffed, "Don't hurt him."

"Hurt me? How could such a little shrimp hurt mâ€¦" But as he insulted the samurai, Hajime had begun to _move_. Out of reflex Jack took a step back, swinging his sword wildly in an attempt to scare the oncoming attacker. Saito, however, merely ducked under the wooden sword as a flurry of snow descended on the stage. Plowing past Jack, the fast samurai drove his wooden sword into the former champion's pelvis in a move that, had he been equipped with a real sword, would have severed the man's body in two at the hip.

Without even watching Jack fall, or sparing a glance at the dumbstruck crowd or the slightly frightened announcer calling the out, Saito moved back to the triangle of his comrades, once more forming a square as they watched to see if either of the other two competitors were going to get up.

Taking advantage of the awestruck crowd's silence I turned to Sannan and asked as loud as I dared, "What was the bet you were willing to throw the match between you and Hajime about, Sannan? I doubt it was just to win." But he ignored me, watching instead with an amused gleam in his eye as the Shinsengumi turned to attack each other.

In awe, I watched the fluid movements of the four remaining men.

All four broke free of their formation at once, leaping forward and spinning on the balls of their feet to face each other. They all took different stances. Shinpachi held his sword in front of him vertically, Hijikata had his pulled back, ready for a quick stab, and Souji had his held across his face again. Saito held his wooden sword over his shoulder, making it seem that he would be bringing it down to cleave at whoever he struck first.

A slight change in the wind sent snow flying in a vortex before them, and as if that were a signal they all sprang. Shinpachi started in on Hijikata only to be driven to his left as Okita and Saito both slashed at his back, which was open. Souji moved after him while Hajime spun threw his attack and followed it with another, a loud clack resounding as Hijikata met his blade with his own. While those two pushed away from each other Shinpachi gained momentum in his lunge towards the shirtless Shinsengumi, their eyes locking before Okita side stepped at the last minute, bringing his sword up to parry the side slash Shinpachi attempted and pushing the larger man into the waiting blades of Hijikata and Hajime.

As the out was called Souji sat on his haunches and twirled his weapon in his hands, waiting for his next opponent. Hijikata and

Saito had their swords pressed together again and were circling, searching for an advantage. "You better win your bet!" I heard Hijikata shout as they pushed away and speared towards each other, Hijikata taking the sword to his chest, his own weapon way to the right of Hajime's ear.

"Even Hijikata huh?" Heisuke muttered to the side of me in confusion. "This ought to be good."

The snow was still whirling down, white outs making it hard to see the competition not but a few feet in front of me. Shukke was shivering, but the glint in her eyes proved an inner warmth as she watched the two remaining fighters circle each other, pacing the center of the stage like lions hungry to prove dominance. I had lost feeling in my toes twenty minutes ago and my fingers were going soon too, so I had no idea how Okita could stand there calmly circling without a shirt on, his lips slowly turning blue. He didn't shiver though, and his teeth were not chattering, though the crowd was. I looked around behind me, surprised at the number of cameras and phones recording the event now, though there hadn't been such interest before.

At some signal I couldn't fathom or perceive Okita charged at Saito, rushing with lethal intent, sword dancing in a wide arc towards the purple haired man's right side. Saito brought his sword to meet it, the loud wood to wood sound startling the crowd out of its silence. I could almost feel the people behind me shiver and start with a collective jump.

"Get him!"

"Kick his ass!"

"Go Souji!"

"Go Hajime!"

"Fuck him up!"

The crowd grew louder and louder but the fighters didn't pay any attention to the accolade. I didn't even see them look over with their intense, focused eyes which were locked on each other while Saito gritted his teeth and Okita stuck his tongue out. Their blades were locked, their strength a stale mate. Hajime aimed a kick at Okita's knee as a white out blinded the judges but the sandy-red haired man stepped away and Saito lashed out with his weapon, catching Okita's and flinging it to the back of the stage. Lifting the wooden sword that had been given to him for the competition one last time, Hajime made to strike at Okita's head when a ringing sound went out and half the sword flew to rest with Souji's.

Okita had drawn his katana.

Cat screamed as the hard, flinty green eyes of Souji Okita locked onto his blade which he had pointed, tip centimeters from a triumphant looking Hajime's jugular. I felt my heart in my throat as Hajime held his now halved sword in front of his chest, a feral look reaching from the back of his eyes. He looked fiercer than anything I could ever imagine and as he jumped back as if he would continue to fight I felt like screaming. Cat did for me. Continuously.

Before either man could move further, Harada and Sannan, who had clambered up the stage as soon as Souji drew, were helping Shinpachi and Hijikata hold both men back while Shukke smacked the back of Cat's head to silence her hysterics.

Danger averted, I felt like fainting but the will to see what was called of this kept me alert. Belatedly the festival's announcer took the stage and called from a cringing position, "Disqualified: Souji Okita. Winner: Hajime Saito."

It turns out that the judges of the martial arts festival had wanted to disqualify all of the Shinsengumi on grounds of association and because they all wore swords on their belts. But the crowd's reaction to this was supplementary to the denials of the other competitors who had been so thoroughly beaten.

'It would be a shame' they argued, 'to win over those who deserve it so much more.'

And so, with Souji sitting out on the winnings, Hajime won first place, Hijikata merited second and Shinpachi ranked third.

And thus we headed home late that afternoon with one thousand eight hundred dollars between three checks that should have been awarded to a dojo, but the Shinsengumi weren't affiliated with any dojo, so the checks were written in full to the individuals. It had been a very profitable day.

But with some unfortunate costs.

Cat, terrified, refused to look at any of the out of time samurai on the way home. The snow was falling dense and dangerously, white outs blocking most of the road. We were about three blocks from our place when Cat slipped and fell into the road, crashing hard on the ice.

Another white out was dancing its way through my vision when I heard a car coming. We all stopped and stared in horror at the four wheel drive Chevy started to slide, breaking too late to avoid my friend where she struggled to get up.

The Shinsengumi that she was now scared of the most ran towards the car, his lips were still turning blue though he had replaced his shirt, and again he pulled his sword.

"Stop!" Cat screamed so loud her throat sounded raw, "Don't kill him!"

Souji slashed his sword out and ripped the truck's tires to shreds before turning to the girl inches in front of the now stopped vehicle. "Who said anything about killing her?" He asked, gesturing to the woman who got out of the car in a panic to see if Cat was ok. "Sorry about your tires," He called to the woman who was wringing her hands in anxiety. "Couldn't let you hit my friend though, you see. I like it when she's around."

After a brief conversation with the nervous woman, she just waved us on towards our destination. She was probably terrified of the man who just slashed her tires with a sword, but I decided to chalk her

generosity up to Christmas spirit to make myself feel better about the fact that Souji was terrifying peopleâ€¦well people other than Cat.

After fussing over the Scaredy Neko to make sure she was alright, besides being covered in snow and flushed from a fast heartbeat, I ushered everyone onward. The snow storm was unrelenting and it was only going to get worse. Nasty nor-easters are nasty.

"Hope this lets up soon!" Shukke yelled in my ear over the wind that whipped past us. "We gotta head to the mall tomorrowâ€¦"

"Why did you forget a gift for someone?"

"Party is coming up and these guys need new threads!"

_Shit the partyâ€¦ _

5. It's My Party: I Can Die If I Want To

**A/N: **

Whew I'm back. Just a quick aside, the guy Ruldy's charracter is based off of would **_never**_** behave this way. The whole me not owning Hakuouki or anything about it still holds true, though the original characters are still mine, well sorta. Sorry for the long wait. Here you go.**

Chapter 4

~It's My Party; I Can Die If I Want To~

The snow stopped at some point in the middle of the night, leaving the ground crystalized in an iridescent combination of snow and ice, which while beautiful, was hell to walk over. Somehow I had convinced Cat that it was safe to sleep with Souji in the house and that no, he would not 'slice her to pieces' and yes, she could sleep in my room.

Unfortunately that had meant Hajime was uprooted from his position in the corner across from my bed and I had wanted the details on his bet.

It was about eleven in the morning when we all scampered across the ice to the bus, well me, Shukke and Cat scampered while the Shinsengumi and Chizuru half walked, half gracefully slid along the ice made bright by the morning sun's glare of death. Needless to say none of us _wanted _to drive on the ice that covered the small side street we lived on, so like in all important decisions, one of us, this time it was Cat, yelled "NOSE GOES!" at the top of her lungs and me and Shukke scrambled to touch our noses first.

"Aw man!" Shukke whined. "Kiri-nee don't make me driveâ€¦"

"You lost." Cat refereed. "You drive. No begging the winners."

We all piled into the behemoth, which needed a new paint job, and settled along the seats. I reached the back first and put my feet up along my seat, resting my back against the window. The Shinsengumi

looked a bit nervous to be in the metal lunchbox on wheels but Sannan bravely tried to start a conversation anyway.

"So umâ€¦Bell-san," For some reason they had all gotten in the habit of calling me that, though I had never in fact told them my last name. I blamed Shukke though. "Why does Shukke-san call you Kiri-nee? Are you related then?"

"Oh! No, no we are not. You see I play this game on my computer called World of Warcraft. That's how Shukke and I met. We used to play together and got pretty close. We called each other Nee-chan." I smiled fondly at the memories of traversing a fake world online with Shukke, fighting off the bad guysâ€¦well we both healed, but still. "Then about, hmm, four months ago I thinkâ€¦ Shukke ran into some issues and moved here from Maryland, me and Cat have known each other for ages, and when my mom refused to house Shukke the three of us got a place and the rest is history. Shukke is my sister from another mister. Cat too. "

"I would very much like to play this game some time." Sannan said after a moment.

"Oh, game! I want to play too." Heisuke nearly shouted, leaning over the back of his seat near the front.

"That reminds me," I muttered, though like in most cases I had no idea how Heisuke's comment reminded me of anything. Saito was leaning his back to the window at the seat in front of me so I reached between the seats and poked him. "What was your bet about?" I asked him when he looked over curiously.

A slight expulsion of breath that brought the light sound of a chuckle escaped his lips before he answered. "I bet Sannan I could get Okita to unsheathe his katana. It wasn't really even that hard, to be honest." He raised his voice a bit and shot at Sannan, "You do owe me a shirt you know."

We arrived at the Greece Ridge Mall twenty minutes later, parking in the back section by the food court. "Your paint is chipping." Harada said to Shukke as he helped her out of the ride, pointing to a patch of paint that was peeling off the bus. We took turns picking a paint job, this time had been Shukke's choice. It was a thunderstorm with lightening crackling down the sides of the monstrosity and there was a dragon facing traffic on the left side. Fire was blooming in its golden mouth and blood gleamed on its teeth. The right side had the dragon's hind legs and tail, great spikes impaling whole trees and more blood everywhere.

"Should be time to get a new coating. Ryane it's your turn right?" She shouted ahead to me. Turning around I saw her holding her hair down while a few kinks got away from her gloved hands. Her brown eyes were snapping beneath golden eye shadow and it was clear that even in the cold air, walking through a crowded parking lot she was having a good time.

"What are you so happy about Shukke?" Cat grouched. "Knowing her we'll have a boring mono-colored visage because it's 'cost effective'."

"Hey now, that was only once, and we couldn't afford what I

wanted."

"Get it this time." Shukke said, sticking her tongue out playfully.

"A tree? In the winter? I think not.

"Nah I'll think of something. It might even merit the top coat!" We had a deal that if one of us painted the car something truly fabulous we would preserve it and keep it forever.

"Ambitious are we?" Shukke teased as we all entered the mall.

There were people everywhere and it was so loud that I figured answering her at the moment would be futile, so I just mimed zipping my lips. Shukke mimed a lock and Cat threw away the key. "No fair!" I yelled at the double team.

We struggled past the mobs of families and teenagers to get to the little Santa and his helpers display, the woman working the camera had to be called to task because she was staring at Heisuke so we kept walking. "There should be a Chase bank over this way; we can cash the checks with my account." Cat offered.

Having agreed upon that the crew set out amidst a sea of stares and whispering teenage girls. _Oh the joys of walking around with attractive men!_ And there was no doubting each one of them was attractive. Ok they were all pretty much down right smokin' , like I could be considered fairly good looking, a little short, but with long black hair and forest green eyes, but my choice of attire could be outlandish so most people just thought I was weird. Today I had toned it down, knowing we would be stared at enough, so I wore a pair of black jeans and the t-shirt that had inspired out bus's paint job to some degree.

Cat and Shukke were also attractive, though I am no real judge of girls, to be honest. Shukke was half and half so she had a darker complexion and this beautiful kinky hair that just sort of frizzed in the morning if she didn't try to tame it the night before. She was much taller than me and there was a kindness in her slightly almond shaped brown eyes that welcomed even weirdoes like me. And Cat was an independent black woman, well a Scaredy Neko but independentâ€¦.usually. She had braids slightly thicker than her slender fingers that went down to about her shoulders and wide expressive eyes, though they hid behind glasses. Her glasses were much prettier than mine tooâ€¦it was irritating. Go go gadget pink Medicaid glasses for me. Cat was in the middle of Shukke and me height wise.

All things considered though, we were, none of us, nothing to compare to the men in the Shinsengumi. We did, however, act almost as a shield because none of the staring girls seemed to have enough courage to approach and I like to think it was because of the three of us. That turned out to be arrogance though, and the members of the Shinsengumi ended up protecting _us_ from the worst of the girls' nasty glares and rude comments. I didn't realize until I heard someone call one of us a 'nasty undeserving whore'. I didn't look around to see who said it, but got a laugh when Cat shouted in the person's general direction, "Yeah, your mom!" and Shukke following up quietly "Who should have swallowed you at birth." At which I couldn't

help but add, "Oxygen thief."

Okita, who was standing close to Cat's left side and kept edging closer every time she noticed him and tried to step away, had his hand over his mouth to hide a grin and while the rest of the guys were more composed their eyes all danced with amusement and their vigilance relaxed a bit. We got to the bank without further incident, though once we got there; we had a little issue with the teller.

He seemed to be getting increasingly annoyed with the girls he worked with stopping their tasks every one to two seconds to gape at the guys standing casually in the little lobby area. The moment he saw them a scowl had appeared on his face, but when he saw the checks, who wrote them, and who they were made out to he became all cheesy grins and false happiness. Fear does weird things to people. After cashing the checks and coming over to us with the cold hard cash, Cat huffed a sigh and suggested we try JC Penny's because they were having a sale today.

It was all the way across the mall. Great.

We were half way through the sea of bitches and tricks when Saito just stopped. He tugged on my sleeve as I walked by and asked, "This is where you get your clothes, is it not?"

I looked at the Hot Topic in front of him and smiled to myself. I could see myself paying for a picture of Saito in Tripp pants. _And nothing elseâ€¦_ Bad thoughts, bad. Shaking my head to clear it, I focused on Hajime's expression. When he said he wanted to check it out, I could tell by the look on his face that he really did.

Looking through the crowds I couldn't see the others, but I got a text moments later from Shukke with a winking smiley face. The crowd looked like it was honing in on Hajime, but on inspection of the foremost girls I practically dragged him into the store. They were all Abercrombie and Bitches- Hot Topic was the anti-prep.

Not able to stop the smile spreading across my face at the audible groans coming from behind me, I scanned the store like an agitated Secret Service agent. I saw a corset top and matching miniskirt in a vibrant teal color that would look great with the black on black embroidery leggings I had bought for a different outfit but I tore my gaze away and looked over at the master swordsman I had come in with who was scanning clearance racks without me even having to tell him to. After all they each only had two hundred twenty five dollars to stock a wardrobe with.

It was fun though. Every ten minutes or so he would enter the dressing room with an arm full of clothing and come out with each outfit and model for me. I had to say my favorite was a pair of black Tripp pants with purple studs, buckles and straps that matched the color of his hair and a form fitting brocade shirt that was black with black embroidered koi and eastern style dragons with toggled buttons in the shape of silvery metal katana.

As he was modeling that particular outfit he called out, "Sannan-san, you'll be buying this shirt for me!" This caused me to look back to the front of the store, where stood the rest of our group. Heisuke immediately dropped his bag of fast food and ran, jaw agape to the

punk section of the store. Looking at the prices, however, he groaned and walked to the clearance section.

"Now this is more like it!" Shinpachi stated with a grin before wandering off to the clearance rack as well.

"Hey, Ryane!" Shukke called with a wave, "At this rate we'll have to go to Marketplace Mall too, this clearance rack is gonna be obliterated."

"We may have to." I agreed. But Heisuke's excited cry as he found something he liked distracted me. He was holding up a pair of purple and yellow plaid pants with cross suspenders on the back that, while kind of strange, I knew it would look good on him. He grabbed a few more things and flew to the dressing room Hajime just finished with, ignoring the nasty look from the girl behind the counter. It was refreshing from all the gaga eyes and 'kyaa' sounds following us but it was a little disconcerting. Maybe she thought hot guys were too mainstream.

I wander around the store while the guys stalked from the clearance rack to the dressing room and back in a steady circle, my eyes continuously wandering back to the teal corset and miniskirt combo. Walking over to it I was shocked at the detail, a scaled pattern was laid out in fine black lace and a pair of draconic wings was stitched into the back on either side of a well concealed zipper. The skirt's lace matched the scale pattern and instead of wings a tail wound from the back to the front of the left thigh. Looking at the price tag I saw it would be over one hundred to get both, but I had to... dragons were my thing. Luckily they had my size, which I knew from buying clothes from Hot Topic many times so I wouldn't have to interrupt the Shinsengumi's flow from rack to room and back.

In the end each of them found a few outfits worth of clearance clothes - when we paid in cash the cashier looked at us and asked "What are you? Drug lords?" And there was enough money each to spare for staple items like solid jeans and mono-colored tees, which we picked up when we finally got to JC Penny's.

They all refused the thought of winter coats though, saying they could handle cold temperatures, which, thinking back on the sword competition and Okita walking around in a blizzard shirtless, I was inclined to believe.

I found I was losing my patience in the ebb and tide of gossiping girls and said gossiping girls' angry boyfriends by the time we got back to the food court, so to avoid the aggravation of losing Nose Goes, I was pretty distracted after all, I just volunteered to drive us home.

The back of the bus was buzzing with talk on everybody's new items and Shukke recommending what each person should wear to the party tomorrow. I wanted to pay attention to her instructions so I would know who was wearing what, but cars kept sliding around in front of the vehicle and I had to navigate slushy ice covered roads.

I realized at that point that I was no longer looking forward to the Christmas Party. The weird part was that the reason I had been looking forward to it was now the reason I kind of dreaded it. One of my friends from World of Warcraft would be there, and I until very,

very recently had a huge thing for him. I don't even know how I got him to agree to make an appearance because he's known all along how I have felt. I've honestly never seen the need to hide things like that.

_But what will Ruldy think when he sees these seven attractive guys living with me. And is my fickle Gemini side showing, or do I really not care? _The thoughts whirled in my head as a cacophony of issues and problems that, given the horn beeping behind me irritated that I was sitting still at a newly green light, I probably shouldn't be concentrating on while I was driving.

That night I convinced Cat to sleep in her own room and turned on my IPod in its dock to jam myself to sleep. And so I didn't hear the door knock as I hummed to Superchick's "Stand in the Rain" or the door opening and snapping shut as I danced around my room in nothing but an oversized t-shirt that I was positively swimming in. The last thing I heard before passing out was

You won't drown

And one day, what's lost can be found

_You stand in the rain _

And thinking to myself, _I like the rain._

* * *

><p>Morning came swiftly to the sound of Shukke banging pots and pans up and down the hallway, if you could consider five in the evening morning. Poking my head out of my door I saw Cat looking like she was going to skin someone as our other housemate grabbed me by the arm and began to drag me downstairs.<p>

"Shukkeâ€¦.Shukke!" I tried to get her attention but she wasn't having it until I just spit it out. "Shukke I am not wearing any pants!"

She stopped to look at me before laughing and continuing to pull me towards the living room. "It's a good thing that shirt looks more like a dress then." Was her belated response as we arrived in front of the Christmas tree. My cheeks lit up brighter than the damn thing though, as I noticed all the Shinsengumi staring at me, their eyes traveling from the crown of my head to my bare feet and back again. Sanosuke actually whistled.

"Shukke!" I shouted, aggrieved.

"Just wanted everyone to know that the party will be starting in three hours, so we should all get dressed and be ready." She spared a glance at me and said, "That means you Miss T-shirt."

Sputtering in rage I swear I could have slapped her, "_You_ dragged me down here like this Shukke!"

"Times-a-tickin'." She dead panned. Ya I was gonna poison her cookies. Ex-lax at least.

With that plan in mind I grabbed my party clothes, the corset and

miniskirt I bought yesterday and my black on black embroidery leggings, and stalked to the shower, locking the door just in case Shukke got any more bright ideas. Last thing I needed was her to bring me downstairs covered in nothing but soap.

In a bit of a fit I logged on my guild's mumble server on my computer to see who was on, after my shower. Seeing my friends Belde and Celdille alone in a channel I went to interrupt them and whatever they were doing.

"Beldeâ€¦Celâ€¦.Shukke dragged me downstairs half-naked in front of the company!"

"Pics or it didn't happen!" Belde joked. While Cel asked "Are you half naked right now, Hikiri?"

"Wait," Celdille continued, "are these the guests Dee was talking about?"

"Is that bitch running her mouth again?" I asked, exasperated.

"Yeah, something about an orgyâ€¦" Belde interjected.

"There. Was. No. Orgy!" I barked, angry now.

"Oh we know." Celdille said sleepily. "You don't really spread your legs like that." She yawned.

"Not really? Chicks still a viâ€¦"

"Watch it Belde!" I warn before he finishes the sentence, not like it's a secret but he promised he would stop spreading my business indiscriminately. "By the way, have either of you seen Ruldy anywhere?"

"No," Celdille said, sounding bored, "He said he was going to a party last night, or getting ready to go to one or something, but he wouldn't say whose or where."

"Of course he wouldn't." I snarked cryptically. If he wasn't going to inform people of whose party he would be attending, far be it from me to do so for him. They wouldn't believe it anyway. My affections towards the man had been a long standing joke for the guild for at least a year now. "Me and my roomies are actually throwing a party in a couple hours so I got to get going. Merry Christmahanakwanzaka."

"Yeah, Happy Kwanza Hik Hik." Belde said with a laugh.

"Belde you know you're white!" Cel was yelling as I logged.

Starting up my ITunes I spent the rest of the time before the party mixing up a playlist to entertain the guests. There was a knock at my door as I did a last minute inspection of my outfit and the eye makeup that I had applied. It was the same teal and the outfit and black along the outsides. A light blush and pink lip gloss finished the look. Though it was kind of annoying, my long black hair clung to my cheekbones and I suppose it looked kind of cute.

Opening the door I quickly realized I had been outdone by a guy. Saito's long hair was also unbound from it's usually side tail and waved down past his shoulders. He was wearing he black brocade shirt with the katana toggles and a pair of skin tight skinny jeans. Somehow he had found a scarf that replicated the one he wore in the anime and that was wrapped around his neck loosely.

All in all I couldn't help the surprised "Wow." That escaped my lips. A small, personal smile lit his face so briefly that I could have imagined it before he offered me his arm stating, "I am to bring you down to the party. Shukke's orders." Ok so I wouldn't be poisoning her cookies with Ex-lax.

Turning up my dock to max volume and blaring the Christmas music playlist I had planned I placed a hand on the crook of Hajime's elbow and allowed him to guide me down the stairs to the sounds of the Tran-Siberian Orchestra's Carol of the Bells.

Reaching the landing I noticed that everyone had arrived while I was fiddling with music, including Ruldy, who as fate would have it, was not watching my entrance on one of our guest's arm.

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

Shukke was gonna get it with those pots and pans. Sure it was after five, but I was napping and I know sure as hell that Ryane was sleeping still. I was very glad she decided to drag Ryane down the stairs into the group of those sword-bearing lunatics instead of me though. I hadn't committed any of their names to memory, except the harmless looking Chizuru, and I was still convinced that the one with the wicked green eyes would kill me sometime soon. I was still shocked that at the mall he had managed to threaten Chizuru's life and no one had even said anything. Instead they all just sort of laughed.

Sure he had saved my life, but he was still hella scary. The others weren't _as_ bad, though they sometimes got these far away looks like they were remembering things I just couldn't fathom. It didn't make me believe that bull that they were from ancient Japan or anything though. Probably Ryane just needed to go back on her medication or something.

It was 7:52 when the first guest came in. He was a friend of Ryane's from online; I believe she called him Ruldy. "You can call me Rick if you like though." He said charmingly. The next knock was a group of people that I knew from Strong Ties, Christian Deedra and Janis walked in together and initiated a group hug before rushing to the beverage table and placing their party gift of hard liquor on it. Vodka, Whiskey, and Tequila. How kind. They spotted Ruldy talking to a group of people wearing swords at their belts and walked over to make friends.

I wanted to warn them against it, but I didn't have the chance because again and again the door knocked. The room was getting pretty full when the door knocked one last time and Shukke launched herself past me to the man behind it. Will was her long distance boyfriend from back at her home and I knew from the look on her face that she would be in her own little world with him most of the night. Which of

course would leave me all alone as hostess, Ryane was still sulking about being dragged downstairs half dressed.

Shukke must have realized the dilemma though, because she beckoned the purple haired wannabe samurai over and told him to go fetch our missing friend. Hearing Carol of the Bells start up from her room, I knew that Ryane would be down in a second and hearing the crowd of friends and family quiet themselves I looked, half expecting something terrible, to see as cute a couple as I had ever seen walking down our stairs. Looking through the crowd I saw the guy, Ruldy look away and take a swig of his no doubt alcoholic beverage.

Good. Ryane tried so hard for so long to get his attention, let him squirm a bit.

An hour of Christmas music passed before people began to demand dancing music, causing Ryane to have to run upstairs and switch to another playlist. It was only when "Teach Me How to Scream" By brokenCYDE came on that I realized that alcohol, girls, and scary but admittedly good looking men with swords created an interesting combo.

Deedra, Ryane's friend Stacey and Shukke's twin sister had grabbed the golden eyed guy the muscle bound spikey haired guy and the scariest one respectively and began to dance with them. Well if grinding could be considered dancing.

Rick came to stand beside me saying, "Looks like Dee will get that orgy after all," though I didn't get what he meant by it. But I sensed his whole body go rigid as he spotted Ryane in the crowd of dancers swing dancing, of all things, with the purple haired one. _Uh-oh_.

Before I could stop the gamer he was stomping towards the pair. Grabbing Ryane's arm when he got to them, he pulled her out of the purple haired guy's arms and spun her to face him before he shook her. And despite the situation my brain could only register 'never shake a baby, never.'

Shukke and I reached them seconds later, fighting against the crowd the whole way. "Hey you little twerp!" I began, the shorter man still shaking my friend violently. "Let go of her! Hey are you listening to me? Hello can you hear me, or does stupid clog your ears? Hello?" I placed a hand on his shoulder and jerked it, causing him to grab said hand and throw it off him. That's when he spoke.

"What are you some kind of whore, getting me to come all the way out here and your showing off the whole time with this guy? Who the fuck is he anyway? Some paid escort? Huh?" He shook her again before the purple haired guy stepped in.

I didn't realize it before but the scary one with green eyes was standing between me and Rick now. His back was to me but I could imagine some intense look in his eyes and perhaps a deep frown on his lips.

"Let her go." The purple haired one's voice was calm and low like he was used to having to break things up. Ruldy gripped my roommates arms harder though, angrier now. Ryane's face scrunched up in pain at

this and the purple head pinched the bridge of his nose in a show of aggravation. Then cocking that hand back he punched Ruldy in his left temple just hard enough to addle the man's brain, making him let go of Ryane in shock.

I almost laughed as the crowd cheered and her defender grabbed Ryane in his arms and ran upstairs. It was then, with a smile on my face that I realized my personal terror had turned to look at me. His eyes were still intense, but everything else about his face was concerned. "Are you alright?" He asked over the partiers and the now severely muffled music. When I nodded, he looked relieved. I turned to leave, putting my back to him but he grabbed my arm and walked to stand in front of my stopped form. "Dance with me. Please." I know I looked shocked, because he smiled and added, "Not like these guys dance. Do you know how to do what Saito and Ryane were doing?"

And I have to admit; as we danced I loosened up and began to enjoy myself in this still nameless terror's presence.

6. Don't Stand In The Rain: Misery Averted

A/N:

I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of.

Chapter 5

~Don't Stand In the Rain; Misery Averted~

After what happened on the dance floor I didn't much feel like partying anymore, and Hajime seemed content to stay with me in my room. So we sat there and listened to music with my door opened once more so that the party could still have tunes, and I avoided his eyes like I would contract the plague by looking in them. I wanted to thank him for intervening when no one else would, but I couldn't think of how. It just didn't seem right to come out and say "Hey thanks for decking Ruldy and defending me." I felt embarrassed that there had even been a necessity.

And then there was the fact that Saito had been just as insulted by Ruldy's words as me. _Who the fuck is he anyway? Some paid escort? _ I cringed at the memory. _What are you some kind of whore, getting me to come all the way out here and your showing off the whole time with this guy?_ Had I really come off that way? Sure I had wanted Ruldy to come so I could hit on him and get him to understand how I felt finally, but had I really seemed to be _showing off_ with Hajime?

Ruldy never saw me the way I wanted him to but I knew Saito would never see me that way either, so I didn't even tender the possibility. No I was the 'just friends girl' to too many people to assume anything different now.

Saito stood in a swift, fluid movement and glided to the door, bringing the heavy footfalls up the steps to my attention. He held one hand to my door ready to shut it in whoever was coming up's face and as the person neared he looked hesitant but stepped aside after a moment revealing my friend Stacey, the one who had grabbed Shinpachi

and hit the dance floor.

Stacey didn't say anything, she never really talked needlessly. Instead she walked to my side and sat down next to me where I sat with my back against my bed. Reaching around my shoulders my friend pulled my head into her ample bosom and patted it in a command to stay put. Saito just took up his vigilant spot in front of me, leaning against his usual corner. Our feet were pressed sole to sole.

"You definitely made the right choice on this one, Ryane." Stacey began. "We were all wondering what you two were doing up here, but you guys were just sitting like this weren't you? It's so cute." My head snapped up in a millisecond.

"Oh, we're notâ€¦it's notâ€¦that isn't how things are." I stuttered, looking to Hajime for support, but he just gave another small grin and titled his head against the wall so he was looking at the ceiling. I pushed my feet against his, but he didn't stop his intent study of what was above us. "Hajime is just being a good friend."

"Is that what we are, Ry-chan?" He asked, and I realized we had never really decided to be friends even, the question a slight reverb of the Shinsengumi's first night here, _If that's what we areâ€¦_

The silence stretched for a long time, a pretty good companion to its buddy Awkward. While those two concepts were getting chummy more footsteps sounded on the staircase and Saito stood back up only to be barreled over by Heisuke and Harada, who were running into the room. Heisuke took over Hajime's corner across from me and Sanosuke took a perch leaning on the end post of my bed. "I don't know why you sat down Heisuke." Sano chuckled as Hajime continued to stand by the door after glancing exasperatedly at the younger man who stole his spot. "We are here because Shukke told us to tell you that present are gonna be open soon, and that that asshole is gone."

With that reassurance I stood up and dusted my skirt off followed by Stacey and Heisuke. One doesn't say no to presents.

To be honest though I didn't get much in the way of good presents and instead got my pleasure out of my friends' pleased faces as they opened what I got them. Or at least I did until I noticed Ruldy's unopened gift still sitting under the tree.

"We could burn it." Shukke suggested when she caught me staring at it with an unhappy countenance. But I shook my head at the idea. It somehow seemed lonely.

"Just leave it." I instructed, looking away.

"It's just going to upset you, you know that right?" Cat pointed out casually.

"Just drop it." I almost pleaded; I really didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"Out the attic window?" Cat joked, "Got it!"

"Cat!" I shouted causing her to flinch in surprise. "Just leave it

be, please."

Gifts handed out we all shared in a glass of Eggnog, some people spiked theirs. I personally didn't. I decided a long time ago to be perma-sober. It was just easier that way. Thankfully the drunker people all had sober drivers or took the bus, which was still running even though it was ten-thirty now. It wouldn't have been too much of an issue to drive people in the big lunchbox on wheels but I was getting tired regardless of having slept all day.

I was so tired that I didn't notice Sannan turning on the TV or the plotting looks on the Shinsengumis' faces before he turned it off. In fact I was so drained that I sat on the larger couch, the one Chizuru had not been sleeping on, and fell asleep. And since I was asleep I didn't feel Hajime scoop me up and bring me to my bedroom and lay me down in my bed. But he did. And since I was asleep in my bed I didn't see Ruldy looking through his car window across the street into our living room window. But he was.

No I just slept my stress and sorrow away to feel better in the morning.

* * *

><p>I woke early the next morning to a huddled group of guests discussing options to some secret in loud hisses outside my door, and since Saito was in the huddle I had no one to ask what the hell was going on. It reeked of a plan though, and I could only think of the last scheme they had come up with. The videos of them duking it out in the park for that competition were still getting a massive amount of views on YouTube daily. It did still amuse me to have written 'you have no idea.' on one of the video comments in response to someone saying 'man those guys are killer with those swords.'<p>

It was the simple things in life that got me by sometimes. I needed something simple now, after what happened with Ruldy I figured the guild wouldn't be looking at me with open arms for much longer and I would probably quit WoW all together if things got bad enough so I needed a hobby. A simple hobby.

Getting up I bunny hopped to the huddle, making plenty of noise so they could hush up if necessary. Predictably the group was silent by the time I got there, so clearing my throat I tapped Hajime on the shoulder and asked simply, "If I ask nice enough will you teach me how to use a sword?"

"It should be simple enough, and it would be an honor to train someone in the ways of the sword. As long as you're sure. You must have conviction." He answered, turning to me as he did so.

"I would like that very much. You guys are hogging all the fun scaring Cat anyway."

"I wonder what it would take to get her to want to learn. I wouldn't mind teaching her how to use a sword." Okita mumbled.

"Oh, she knows how to use a sword." Shukke remarked popping out of nowhere.

"Shukke," I warned.

"If she knows how then why is she so scared all the time?" Heisuke asked, confused.

"Oh, not those kinds of swords." Shukke's eyes were glinting with mischief. When they all looked confused she continued. "The kind of sword all guysâ€¦" And I smacked her on the arm to shut her up.

"Shukke that's enough."

Looking from me to her and back again Hijikata cleared his throat, "Well if you want to try to convince her to come along we can go to the park and practice. We haven't done so since we got here. We will finish the discussion later."

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

The air was cold and crisp at the park and it was the day before Christmas. There were several children and their parents at the plastic playground and a couple was walking across the bridge spanning the river beyond the last baseball field covered in snow.

I can't believe I agreed to this. The terrifying one had approached me forty-five minutes ago with an invitation to join the guests and Ryane in the park, though he wouldn't explain why. At first I had wanted to stay with Shukke in the house, but he had called me out. _"Well then,"_ He had said. "_I guess you really are just a scardey Neko._"

And so I had agreed to come on this trip, trying to ignore Shukke's snide smile as I walked out the door with them and the overly talkative nature of the youngest one who had babbled about every little thing as we walked to the park.

Now we were at the park and he was commenting about the girl, Chizuru, making what he called a snow bunny. Looking down at the thing it was pretty cute with little twig whiskers and leaf ears. Just then I felt something cold, compact and wet slam into the back of my jacket. _Snowballs._ Figures.

Looking up and behind me the terrifying one stood throwing another snowball up and down casually while the other psycho sword wielders stood to either side of him with smirks on their faces. Ryane must have seen the look on my face because she moved towards me, hands up in a gesture of peace. I was mad. And more than that I was tired. I was tired of being afraid of these punks. They wanted to play with glorified knives? Fine I would cut them up. I would use my nails if I had to.

Ryane reached me and put her hand on my shoulder to calm me, but that green eyed monster was still just standing there, laughing his ass off now, as if it were the biggest joke in the world, throwing a snowball at me. I shrugged her off and stalked over to him in a rage.

"What is your issue?"

"Not scared?" The man asked with a smirk and I swear I could have hit him.

"Not as scared as you're gonna be. I'm tired of this shit, I'll put you down like the dog you are. Who do you think you are justâ€¦" And he shoved his extra sword in my face, still in its sheath.

"We fight with these, save your words." He still had that irritating smirk across his lips like he knew it all.

"You know damn well I don't know how to use a sword."

"Then I will teach you."

"Who would want to take lessons from a psychopath?" I barked, terror abating further and further.

"Slide the sheath through your belt loops and draw your sword we begin with downward strokes. Just put one foot in front of the other, bend at the knee. Bend more." He walked over and corrected my half-ass, not-paying-attention stance and pulled his own sword out to show me. I couldn't help but flinch as he drew but he just stood beside me and showed me what to do.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"Well that was an interesting method to get her attention." I continued to stare in wonder at Cat working on her stance, trying to mimic Okita in what he was doing.

"How does the saying go?" Hajime asked from beside me, "There is more than one way to skin a Cat?"

"Funny." I quipped sarcastically. "How much do you guys know about things from this time?"

"I'm not sure. Most things we just seem to know. Like your language, your slang and idioms, your sayings and such, that is all stuff we know. I don't know how. Though some things need a bit of explanation. Like that 'that's what she said' nonsense. Somehow we missed that one." The distaste on his face was plain, but I chose not to comment on it.

The others had long since paired off to practice their swings or to duel. Hijikata and Chizuru were off to the left and he was helping her with her kodachi. Hajime pulled his own shorter sword from his belt loop and handed it to me.

"I thought we would start with sticks or something." I commented nervously.

"If you start with a stick it will be difficult for you to adjust to the weight of a real sword. You may use mine for as long as you like."

Still nervous I hooked the sheath through my belt loop and turned towards him.

"You'll need to draw." He prompted me quietly.

I wanted to draw like he did and the arrogant part of me thought, _oh this will be easy_. So I tapped the hilt up with my thumb and drew as fast as I could. It wasn't graceful, and all it earned me was a deep cut down the length of my thumb.

A really, really deep cut.

Somewhere nearby a car door slammed shut and closer by I heard Hajime call for Chizuru before grabbing my wrist and forcing me to lift my arm so my hand was way above my heart to slow the bleeding as best he could.

I heard a scuffle behind me and saw an enraged quality in Hajime's eyes so I turned my tear filled eyes to see what was going on. There stood Ruldy, his hand on Chizuru's shoulder holding her away from me, with both Harada and Shinpachi in the process of throwing him off of her and to the ground. Hijikata lead the Oni girl to me before bodily lifting the gamer and carrying him away from me.

"That's cut almost to the bone." Chizuru announced after one glance. She looked me deep in the eyes and said, "You have nothing to fear, try not to be grossed out now, okay?" Cat had reached the scene and reached for her cell phone when she heard Chizuru's prognosis.

"Don't." Okita growled at her, snatching the small pink rectangle from her hands. "You didn't believe her when Ryane told you who we are, right?"

"Let me call an ambulance, she is losing a lot of blood." Cat commanded, her eyes going wide as Chizuru drew her short sword and sliced into her own flesh.

"You will believe us though." Okita continued. "We _are_ the Shinsengumi of the Bakumatsu era of Japan. She is Yukimura Chizuru of the Oni. Ryane is not in any danger."

As I heard this I stared down at the small pool of blood forming around Chizuru's wound and knew what was expected of me. Already it was closing so without thinking twice I latched onto her arm and drank. Where I had expected a bitter coppery taste, her blood was sweet and almost fruity. All too soon I felt my own cut close and the blood began to taste as blood should so I let go with a grimace to look into Cat's horrified eyes.

She stared from my healed thumb to Chizuru's healed arm and back before the horror melted away and she smile. "I think you should have started her on a stick." She commented before carefully unsheathing her sword and continuing with her practice.

* * *

><p>Several hours with a stick taught me the stance and a newly healed thumb taught me that it was not easy to draw fast. Along with that, those several hours of joking Shinsengumi taught me I would never _ever_ live that down.

7. Of Mice and Men: the Better Plans

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

Chapter 6

~Of Mice and Men; the Better Plans Of Either~

I was lying in bed stroking the new skin covering the wound I had given my thumb when there was a knock at my door. As with the last four times someone knocked on my door I didn't answer. The Shinsengumi had yet to let up on teasing me about my injury, and what's worse they had started in on my drinking Chizuru's blood. On top of that, the Shinsengumi had learned certain habits. I knew that Hijikata and Saito were the only ones who would really think to knock on my door so after locking it I refused to open it. Heisuke had been the first to get me to answer the door by knocking.

He had been mid-jest when I slammed it in his face.

Again that mild mannered knock echoed off my door, just loud enough to be heard over my blasting music. I paused my music and swung open the door, furious, only to have Hajime push me into the room and walk in after me, sending a glare over his shoulder as he shut the door behind himself.

"What the hell?" I asked, talking with my hands as I often did in frustration.

He answered by grabbing my hands and looking intently at each thumb, a look of intense concentration on his face. "I'm fine!" I snapped at him, pulling my hands out of his grasp. He nodded and moved to sit silently in his corner. "I didn't say you could stay."

"You would be so rude as to kick your Sensei out of your room after he took the time to make sure you're okay?" It sounded like he was reprimanding me. So clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth in agitation I walked back to my IPod dock and turned my music back on, though I did turn it down a decibel or two.

"You listen to music a lot." He commented softly. "And the more emotional you are the louder it gets."

"You're the one who wanted to stay." I fired at him.

"I was just wondering why that was."

"I suppose it's because when I listen to the music I do, it reminds me that I am not the only one out there, you know?" I don't know why I was trying to explain something like this to him, maybe I really did want to be his friend.

"The words are sad usually though, how does that make you feel better?"

"I'm not the only one out there hurting. I suppose it empowers me.

You know, makes me feel like my world isn't so grey or the only grey one there is."

"We all live in the same world Ry-chan." He reminded.

"Yeah but our perceptions of the world that we all live in changes that world for us. The way I view something is not the way you view something. And because of that we all have different worlds. And what shades those worlds is different for everyone too, what makes us happy, sad, angryâ€¦these all give us different worlds."

"What makes your world happy?"

"The people I care about, rainstorms both physical and metaphorical, and music." I told him shortly.

"Why rainstorms?" He asked, not quite understanding.

"It never rains forever, and rain helps things to grow."

I turned to him, watching him stroke his chin with his left hand as he thought. "What do you think of the people who make music?"

His question startled me because I felt it was out of left field a bit. "I think, aside from the cockier ones, they are the best kind of givers. What they do gives me comfort and peace. I admire the talent and respect those who use it."

I was about to ask why he was asking all these questions but he interrupted my train of thought by saying, "Goodnight Ry-chan."

And so with my window of opportunity closed I flicked my light switch off and went to bed. "Good night Hajime." I never did put together that once Saito entered my room the others left me alone.

* * *

><p>I thought I was dreaming sometime that night when I heard Hijikata mutter, "So are you in Saito?" and Saito's reply, "Yeah, I found my reason." Before slinking further into oblivion.<p>

* * *

><p>I woke up sometime early the next morning to Cat's indignant squawk and the sound of Souji Okita's laugh coming from her bedroom. Saito was sprawled casually against my doorframe in a skull and crossbones thermal shirt and white Tripp pants with black chains latticing from pocket to pocket. His white scarf was wrapped elegantly around his neck and trailed down his lean chest.<p>

All in all it was a pretty good thing I wasn't a typical anime character or I would have a nosebleed. Not appropriate.

With only a minimal amount of warning, meaning he waited three seconds between popping his swords seal and drawing it, Saito was flying towards me with his sword slashing in an arch to my left side. I rolled out of bed to the right and drew my sword as neatly as I could, standing ready to face him.

I heard Souji say, "She's doing better than you did, Neko." And

though I really wanted to slide my eyes over to see Cat's reaction I kept focused on Saito.

It's a test. That was all I could think as I stood firmly rooted to my spot in front of the wall beside my bed. "Hey Ryane, relax a bit." I looked over to Souji out of instinct when he called my name but by the time I looked back to my Sensei, Saito's body was leaning into mine, his blade so close to my neck my skin was tingling.

"Souji," he intoned seriously, "distractions were for another, later, lesson."

"Yeah but she passed today's test. Might as well keep it interesting." Souji responded in such a carefree manner that Cat instinctively slapped the back of his head.

"You could have gotten her killed." She yelled at him, though I noted she didn't seem scared.

"Not likely, if it's Saito's blade. He's got a lot of control. Your friend is in good hands. Not that you have to worry about me or anything. I haven't killed since the night I died and, quite frankly, it's a nice change of pace." His words trailed off though and he called my name again. It was only then that I realized Hajime had not moved from his deadly position and I had been staring at him, trying not to pant. It seemed a natural reaction though from being terrified and having a deadly weapon pushed close to your jugular.

Souji called my name again, but I couldn't bring myself to turn my head and risk a cut, so instead he called to Saito. "Dude, you're freaking her out, get off." Cat called from the doorway.

When he just continued to look me in the eye Souji called out, "We have something to do today Saito, or were you going to stare at the pretty lady all day."

That worked and he, in one fluid movement, stepped back from me and sheathed his katana.

Shukke took that opportunity to pop out of nowhere and address the sword wielders. "Are you guys ready yet, the rest of the guys are waiting in the bus."

"Um, Shukke?" I began, but she cut me off with a wave of her hand.

"Nope, it's a secret I will not tell you where we are going or what we are getting, just know it is our gift to the Shinsengumi for Christmas."

"I was going to say," Again she stopped me.

"I don't care, I am not telling!"

"Chick your fly is down and you have a booger in your nose!" Cat yelled at her.

"I was trying to tell her that." I stage whispered Cat with a grin as our housemate zipped her pants and wiped her nose. "Don't spend too much Shukke." I warned at her now retreating back.

"Don't worry," she called back to us, "I will make sure they get clearance items. Nothing fancy."

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

"This is the place." I let out a happy sigh as I parked the bus in the back of the parking lot attached to a music store, House of Guitars. "Now the other two don't know I won money on this scratch off so try to take price tags off the items you buy before we get home."

"Are you sure it's ok to spend it on us?" Sannan asked, pushing his glasses higher on his face as the group entered the store.

"Yeah, I mean we didn't get you gifts for the holiday so now would be a good time to do that while I can. You guys said you picked out what each of you would get right?" She waited for the affirmative nod and sent them on their way through the store with a wave "Go get 'em then!"

Time went by quickly within the store and I was surprised to see the sun hitting noon, even though we had gotten here bright and earlier when the store opened, but the Shinsengumi made their purchases leaving about three hundred dollars out of the two thousand five hundred I had won on the scratch off. But if I was right, I would make an interesting investment out of it.

I mean they may have never played a day in their lives, but they had courage, determination and honest good looks. With what was on the news after the party this little bit would lead to something great.

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

"You bought them musical instruments!?" I was yelling I know, but that can't have been cheap, not at all.

"Yeah, but it was all on clearance so it's okay, right?" Shukke asked, blinking innocently up at me from where she sat on the sofa.

"Clearance my ass!" I shouted, "I know you, you probably made a quick buck off a lottery ticket and bought them name brand fresh off the market gear. But whatever, we would vote to send it all back and I would lose, 'cause Ryane is a sucker. Why did you buy them instruments then?"

"It's for the Ten Ugly Battles event," Shukke announced, sitting there grinning like an idiot.

"The what?" Ryane asked, finally jumping into the conversation.

"The Ten Ugly Battles event." Shukke repeated slowly, "It was on the news the night of the party. You were so tired Saito carried you to bed so you might have missed it. You know how the Ten Ugly Men

Festival comes around every summer? Well Ten Ugly Battles is a battle of the bands and the winner performs at the festival.

"Isn't it awesome?" She gushed from her seat with almost annoying enthusiasm.

"Have they ever played before?" Ryane asked exasperated.

"Fuck that! Where are they gonna practice?" I shot at Shukke, who just gestured to the living room with a 'duh' face.

"Uh, if I may?" The one with glasses looked over at me and I made sure to give him a look that said 'no you may not'. He hesitated but continued. "We know the basics of each instrument here, it's merely a matter of putting that knowledge into practice. Give us a bit of time, we will be playing beautifully."

"I'd be losing this vote too," I huffed in annoyance. "Fine, I'm going for a nice long walk in the park. Then I am going to practice my sword techniques. You have till I get back to practice. Do _not_ piss off the neighbors."

* * *

><p>As we are entering the main plot of this story, I feel I should put the warning out now. Any music used in this fanfic belongs to the artists that perform the songs and the companies that produce them. That being said, though the guys of the Shinsengumi will be performing songs as though they (and by exenstion I) wrote the music this is not the case and there shall always be a note on the name of the song and the artists for those who want to look into any song. Anyone who has a suggestion for something to be used in this story please feel free to PM me and i will note whose idea it was in likewise fashion. Thank you for reading my fanfic as always.**

8. 14Phantom: I Wil Not Bow

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

As a note to this chapter: I wanted to do something for my more consistent reviewers and so I decided to name the rival bands after them. Showcased so far are 14Phantom (Whose fic about Kazama; Hanashobu is great, as is the sequel she is working on(Exotic Flower)). Fallingwisteria, another great Hakuouki fic'er whose story about Saito and an Original character Aoi (Blue Moon) is splendid and Ravenscry21 who I haven't read because she works with animes/mangas I haven't seen or read yet but who has kind words that i appretiate. I have room in the roster but i will NOT use pen names of people who ask me to, just review.

**thanks to these three for their support and help with content, especially 14phantom who always points out when my facts i use are incorrect, this first chapter of the battles showcases you specifically. (note the title.) **

**ALSO: I misspelled the name of the fanfic, because I guess I am

kind of an idiot, that has been changed. Sorry for the long note, enjoy.**

* * *

><p>Chapter 7<p>

~14Phantom; I Will Not Bow~

Cat left in a hurry everyday around two o'clock in the afternoon to walk and practice. Sometimes I went with her and we dueled and talked, sometimes I stayed at home and listened to the Shinsengumi practice. It had only been a month but, man, those guys were getting good. At first I thought the amount of people in that band would lead to chaos. But even with two drummers, (Shinpachi and Harada) two guitarists, (Heisuke and Okita) a bass player, (Hijikata) and one who played bass, keyboard, and violin (Sannan) everything sounded pretty boss.

At first I had also been skeptical about vocals. They all spent their time charging and screaming at people in battle. Who among them could actually sing? But that first day when I had asked, I was greeted by smug looks and Hijikata's simple, "Watch this." As he jerked his head in Saito's direction.

I didn't understand the words to the traditional Japanese ballad he sang, but his voice was pure and beautiful, if almost smoky and even if the music never lived up to that voice, I was a fan.

Today I was walking with Cat though, trying to convince her to listen to the band and how much they had progressed.

"Look, we both know that they could sound terrible and the crowd would still love them. They work on this what? A couple months? And the bands who have been working so much longer get out staged by a bunch of pretty boys. I mean, sure, the purple head can sing. But they don't want this. I mean they want itâ€¦but do they _want_ it?" Cat tended to repeat the same reason over and over for her opposition to the idea, and today seemed no different.

And I always replied the same way, "I don't know what their reason is for this Cat. But if they win, it will be because they deserve it, not their genetics." Her grunt of assent didn't sound like she understood that, but then we drew the swords we were still borrowing from two of the men in the band she was so against and stopped talking in favor of swordplay.

* * *

><p>"You sure about this?" Shukke asked holding the sheet of paper I had given her at arms-length.<p>

"Yeah. Think we can get the cut outs and spray it the day of the last battle?" I responded enthusiastically.

"Consider it done." Looking up at me, she smiled, "Now they just have to win."

* * *

><p>It was February ninth and the first battle would be at eight sharp. Each band would be able to play one song each night of battle. For each night a winner would be decided based on judge approval and audience reaction. On the last night of battle an encore could be called by the crowd, awarding extra credentials to the band afforded it. Those were the rules. They could do whatever they wanted with the lighting, props and clothes, provided they weren't naked. So it was confusing to me, Shukke, and Cat as to why the band walked to the bus wearing all black and ski-masks.<p>

"Umâ€¦" Cat started intelligently. "Ski masks?"

"You'll see," Okita said playfully.

"We will not be judged for our looks in this. If we win by our music you will approve of us in this, Cat?" Hijikata looked at her with piercing purple eyes and she stared dumbly at him in answer.

"Don't worry," Saito assured me as he climbed onto the bus, "The masks are just backup."

When we got there we were immediately separated, the fellas going to the backstage area and me, Cat, Shukke, and Chizuru were directed to the seating. We were early thankfully, and were able to procure front row seats right in the middle of the stage.

The first few of the ten selected bands went by in a blur when the duo announcing bands called out the next band.

"Hi," A pretty girl with long, bright pink hair and a bunch of pale pink flowers pinned through it said cheerily into the mic. "We are 14Phantom, born and raised in Greece, New York and this is our song, _Pieces._"

A pianist keyed in on her keyboard in time with their bassist and after a short intro the pinkette opened her mouth and began to sing. Had I not been voting for the Shinsengumi I would have said these guys should win.

"_You're not running just enough of a wreck
>To hold the hurt heart everybody expects
And I know you wrote a history of making a mess
>Misunderstood's an understatement at best

How long, how long will you demand my sympathy?
>We all know hurt so why do you feel the need to?

Put on a pretty face, give them a pretty taste
>No one's buying it anyway."

The crowd was going crazy and continued to act a mess until the band finished their song. "Thank you! We're 14Phantom, good night."

The sound of moving equipment was rushed under the amped voices of the announcers. "Now, not to alarm anyone, but our next act has asked to play in complete darkness. Something about wanting us to hear their music and ignore the way they appear."

The crowd murmured at this, confused and surprised. "So please keep your hands to yourselves and your valuables in front of you or in

your pockets. And here we go." The lights snapped off immediately and the sound of a lot of footsteps walking on stage echoed off the walls.

"Since we only have a few minutes to introduce ourselves I will keep it brief," Hajime said into the microphone in front of him. "We are Umarekawaru, it's Japanese for 'to be born again' or 'a fresh start on life.' We each have our reasons for doing this, mine is to be the best kind of giver. Our song tonight is called _I Will Not Bow._"

"Pay up Heisuke, it's one of mine." Okita called into his microphone. The crowd laughed, and only laughed harder when Hijikata called into his, "Shut up and play Souji."

The guitars escalated, drums and bass added in to make a heady combination of sounds until Hijikata screamed into his mic, "Fall!"

Then Saito was singing.

"_Now the dark begins to rise
>Save your breath it's far from over
Leave the lost and dead behind
>Now's your chance to run for cover"

I felt like I was being pulled in by that voice, by the music they made together. The crowd was absolutely silent, leaning in trying desperately to hear every nuance of instrument and voice. And they played on, completely uncaring that everyone was listening with bated breath.

"_Fall!" _Hijikata called out again.

"_Watch the end through dying eyes
>Now the dark is taking over
Show me where forever dies
>Take the fall and run to heaven
All is lost again, but I'm not giving in"_

And then my favorite part came as Hajime belted out,_
>_"And I'll survive, paranoid
>I have lost the will to change
And I am not proud, cold blooded, fake
>I will shut the world away
And Hijikata screaming
"Fall!"_

They finished their song and Hajime was back on the mic, "Thank you, we are Umarekawaru." The lights went on and the stage was empty except for their instruments on stands and a poster board with the words "We Live Again" painted on it in huge red letters.

Finally the crowd reacted, screaming, clapping, calling, chanting the band name. Fans from other bands had, in some cases, taken off the clothing or buttons supporting those bands and thrown them on stage. One of them was a girl who had to be taken away by security for taking her shirt off.

"Oiy." I heard Saito over the speakers and realized the microphone he had been using was missing from the stands. "We appreciate it, your support. But please have respect for the bands to come." A few girls

squealed and more began to scream at his pleading voice when, I'm guessing, Okita grabbed the mic from him and shouted into it.

"What he means is: shut your traps and calm down; the night's still young." It worked and I could almost see Hijikata face palming at the reaction of everyone sitting silently with their hands folded in their laps. Chizuru was giggling beside Shukke.

Next on stage was a doom metal band called Falling Wisteria. When they got onstage there was no introduction they just started playing. I spied my friend Steve as the guitarist. He was right they played slow, low and heavy. I waved frantically in his direction, but he seemed a bit pissed off. Probably something to do with one of his band's fans throwing a leather vest with their crest on it onto the stage after Umarekawaru performed. _Ouch rejection._

The night came to a close with a group of high school students that went by the name Raven's Cry and their song _The Birds and The Bees, _which had a sexually charged electro pop vibe that the more scene kids in the audience couldn't help but dance to.

Turning in my seat I heard a girl behind me say, "I would totally bang the singer of Umareka-whatever to this song."

"You don't even know what he looks like." The girl next to her shouted over the climax of Raven's Cry's song. "Maybe they turned the lights off because they are like... I don't know, completely hideous."

"Or they are gorgeous." A third girl threw in.

"Why would they hide good looks, I mean wouldn't it help to see them then?"

"They said they wanted to be judged on their music not their looks."

"It could go both ways, my vote is hideous."

"Who _cares?" _The original speaker broke up the debate. "That _voice_. I just want to make him say my name!" Rolling my eyes I faced forward again in time to see the lead singer of Raven's Cry do a dance across the stage.

Well at least he's not taking things to a depressing level like Steve, getting all pissed off over a vest.

Raven's Cry finished up and got off the stage just as my cell phone went off. The intro to Panic! At The Disco's _Ballad of Mona Lisa _echoed off the back of the stage before the announcer duo could begin speaking so I got up and walked out while they made their closing remarks. I would have like to hear if Umarekawaru or 14Phantom made it to the top this time, they seemed the highest contenders to me, but it was my guild leader calling.

"Hey, uh, Hikiriâ€¦ Its Oltes, from WoW."

"Yeah, I know. Caller id is a wonderful thing. What's up?"

"Well you hadn't been on in a couple days for more than a couple

hours and some things came to light in an officer meeting about Ruldy going to a party of yours and there being a disturbance. Anyway, in light of that and the spotty log in pattern, I wanted you to know we removed your characters and banned you from the voice service." Years of service just gone, just like that. "The ban is temporary, we just don't want you coming on and complaining for a couple weeks. I'm sure you understand."

I felt like a gaping fish, I kept opening and closing my mouth and nothing came out. I wanted to tell him "No I don't understand." Or "What about my side of the story?" But I just stood there. The tears started to roll down my cheeks as Cat came up behind me and took the now dial toning phone out of my hands and Shukke guided me to the bus with a comforting hand on my back.

I didn't notice the guys already on the bus, I didn't hear the ignition starting up and I didn't feel the bus jumping over bumps as one of my friends sped me home. All I could think was _I'm not worth it to them. _ All I could hear was "I'm sure you understand." And all I could feel was my self-worth draining away as the realization that I spent close to two years with these people who wouldn't even hear my end of it because I wasn't worth that much to them.

Laying in my bed twenty minutes later I heard the door to my room open and shut, and the soft pad of feet carry someone to the corner beside my bed. I didn't turn to see who it was, and I didn't ask, but I found out as soon as that pure, beautiful and slightly smoky voice sang to me.

_She never slows down.
>She doesn't know why but she knows that when she's all alone,
feels like it's all coming down
>She won't turn around
The shadows are long and she fears if she cries that first tear,
>the tears will not stop raining down_
>_So stand in the rain
>Stand your ground
Stand up when it's all crashing down
>You stand through the pain
You won't drown
>And one day, what's lost can be found
You stand in the rain__._

And I slowly drifted to sleep to my new favorite version of my favorite song.

* * *

><p>Songs used in this chapter include:

Pieces by Icon For Hire (14Phantom's song)

I Will Not Bow by Breaking Benjamin (Umarekawaru's song)

Stand in the Rain by Superchick (The song at the end of the chapter)

Songs mentioned in this chapter:

The Birds and the Bees by Breathe Carolina (Raven's Cry's song)

The Ballad of Mona Lisa by Panic! At the Disco (Ryane's ringtone)

9. Intermission One: The Time To Rebuild

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 8<p>

~Intermission One; The Time To Rebuild~

I didn't do much those next few days. Throughout the apathetic stretch of what could probably have been depression I had time to think though.

I would sit in front of my computer with the voice service screen warning me I was banned and mope. I had known the people in that guild for a long time, and I had been discarded without much in the way of a good reason.

To be honest, I blamed the Shinsengumi, I mean, if I hadn't seen them appear in the mall I would have danced the night away with Ruldy and everything would be the way I had wanted it to be for so long. Or at least that's what I thought.

"Chick, Ruldy showed his true colors the moment he started to get mad, let alone when he was shaking you, or do you not remember violence well? Not that that purple haired guy is much better running around with a sword." Cat was standing in my doorway with a hand on her hip and a scowl on her face. "And if you want these things to stay private don't mutter them while sitting so depressed over there. What is it you always used to say back when we had our problem classes?"

"Do you mean when she used to say 'Ours not to ponder what is fair in life, but finding what may be, make it fair up to our means.'" Shukke said from the stairs. "She told me that a lot in the past."

"That's the one. Do I need to send you to the classes again or something, get your prospective screwed back right?"

"NO!" I couldn't help shouting. That was a part of my old life, I didn't need classes anymore. I was betterâ€¦we both were.

"Relax, Ryane." Cat said coming into my room, hands up in a gesture of peace. "I was kidding. All I mean is, it's not like you to blame what you consider fate for things that go wrong in your life. It's not like you to resent and regret. Be like you usually are, find the blessing. Cause I sure as hell think it's a good thing you didn't end up with the baby shaker."

The steps creaked and before I could ask who else was there, Hajime called out softly, "That makes two of us."

I opened and shut my mouth in frustration wanting to take some of this negativity out on the man but Shukke beat me to it. "Be nice Ryane. He's been worried. We all are."

I turned my back on them, annoyed and feeling fresh tears brim my eyes. _I just don't like being discarded._

Shukke and Cat walked away, the former placing a hand on Hajime's shoulder as she passed and the latter giving him a meaningful look. The kind of look that said, _Don't be stupid._

And so with a nod, Hajime continued up the stairs and into my room, shutting the door behind him and walking over to the computer. Before I could stop him he reached behind my desk and _unplugged_ it. As my computer screen blinked to black so did my vision, but Saito just walked over to my dresser and turned on my IPod dock, blasting the volume of some song that I didn't register in my rage.

As fast as I could, though I knew it wouldn't be fast enough I pulled my fist back and made to punch Hajime, screaming in fury. But he stood there and took it, barely moving as my fist connected with his face. _He is pitying me._ I was so mad I didn't think twice about going for the sword he let me borrow, but he was a step ahead of me, pinning my hand to the hilt, like I had done to him that first night.

"It isn't pity." He shouted over the music as if he could read my thoughts like they were pasted on my face. "It's friendship." Reaching over he turned the music down so that the words '_I said maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me'_ washed over me at a soothing levelâ€¦Wonderwall. Once he didn't have to shout anymore Saito continued. "You need something to be mad at. Be mad at me. You need something to blame. Blame me. You need something to hurt. Hurt me. I am here for whatever you need. And I will never, ever, hurt you. No matter what you say, no matter what you do."

He watched the fight go out of me as I slumped to my knees and cried. Speaking the words that I had been thinking for the past couple days, I said, "I don't like being discarded."

"Hmm, but I heard your phone going off pretty regularly that first night. Not everyone abandoned or discarded you, and those who did showed their true colors, as Cat put it. I personally wouldn't waste my time on people who have no time for me." My tears stopped completely in a short while, and with those tears gone, Hajime asked, "Now do you have any ice? You hit pretty hard when you're madâ€¦"

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

It hadn't taken much to get the band and Chizuru out of the house for a walk with me and Cat. They saw the 'oh shit' looks on our faces and all it took was a few seconds of the band mates staring at each other and Chizuru's question of, "They are gonna have a go then?"

When Cat nodded she was the first to move. Her first instinct was to run upstairs and stop the argument before it happened, but all of a sudden a song was blaring from Ryane's room so loud we could hear the words through the wood of her door. Next came a scream of pure rage

which caused Chizuru to pause on the stairs and run back down and right out the door.

Cat stopped for a moment and asked me, "What if she tries to kill him? Maybe we should leave Chizuru here."

I opened my mouth to reply but Okita said before I could, "This is Saito we're talking about. He won't let things get that far. I hope."

"No one asked you, you know."

"You know, Cat...which is short for Catharine isn't it? But you never call us by our names, it's always 'you' and a point." We were half a block away by now and the music could still be heard, though not distinctly, from Ryane's bedroom.

"First of all, don't use my government name, its Cat. Period. And to be honest, I don't know your names." I felt my jaw drop at that.

"Catâ€¦they have been living with us for months."

"She was scared of us though." Souji came to her rescue with that observation unexpectedly. "Why would she care what to call us?" Cat scowled at him for reminding the group that she had been absolutely terrified of them and popped the seal on her sword distractedly. Souji mimicked her action in case she got any bright ideas.

A few moments passed and I almost laughed and hugged her as she said, "Well are you gonna tell me your name or not?" She was so cute, all stubborn and reluctant-like.

"It's Souji Okita." He said with a flourish of a bow and a smirk.

"So Souji?"

"You may call me that yes. People like Shukke call me Okita though, so feel honored."

"Huh?" Cat's look of confusion was priceless as he explained Japanese culture and using first names and suffixes.

"Basically to use a first name is to show familiarity and friendship." I shortened his lecture, letting his glare bounce off me.

"Well." Cat said at length, "I would say 'nice to meet you' but I met you a while agoâ€¦Okita."_Oh burn._

"Now Catharine, that's not very nice," he admonished, clucking his tongue playfully.

Cat growled before grating out, "It's Cat!"

"It's Souji." Okita fired back with a deeper smirk.

"You just said Souji is for people familiar with you." Cat rebutted testily.

"And you're not?"

"I'd rather not beâ€¦"

"But are you?" His smirk was even starting to irritate me.

"Okita stop it." I warned him, knowing Cat was gonna blow any second. At least the park, which we had just reached, was empty.

"Yeah Okita, stop it." Cat added.

"Fineâ€¦" He agreed surprisingly. "Catharine." That did it.

Cat drew her sword and held it in front of her and for the first time since she had started lessons with Souji Okita, I kind of feared for her life.

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

What am I doing? That was the only thing I could think as I held the short sword in front of me while the green eyed terror, who went by the name Souji Okita, pulled his sword from its sheath. _Nothing but a whole lotta stupid._ That's all I could think as the rest of the band and Chizuru stopped ahead of us and turned back to watch, an assorted look of astonishment and horror on their faces.

"You sure you're ready for this, little girl?" Okita asked menacingly.

_Little girl? Oh no he didn't! _"Bring it, wannabe samurai."

"Wannabe?" His quiet, almost pondering voice was the scariest thing I had heard in my life and a memory of something else he had said in a similar tone popped to the surface of my mind, making me scared enough to piss myself. _Not that you have to worry about me or anything. I haven't killed since the night I died and, quite frankly, it's a nice change of pace__._ He was a killer.

Then my personal green eyed terror was moving towards me in a lunge and I couldn't help it, I screamed and fell into the snow. I felt more than saw the blade of his weapon embed itself in the snow to the left of my head and all of a sudden Souji was straddling me and leaning in, inches from my face, one hand on his katana's hilt the other gloveless in the snow at the side of my head.

"I told you," His tone was playful as leaned even closer, his lips hovering over my ear, his breath warming my skin. "You have nothing to worry about, you're in good hands. And if you haven't regressed into terror again from this, I would very much like you for you to call me 'Souji'â€¦Cat." I never knew those condescending, disdainful green eyes could be warm, but as I looked into them I couldn't help but nod. "Thank you." He replied.

Maybe being familiar with Souji wouldn't be all bad.

"Oh get a room!" Shukke shouted at us, bringing me back to the

reality of the _too_ familiar position he had me in.

"Not a bad idea." He replied.

I take it back, it's all bad.

We stayed at the park till sun down, and walking back Shukke poked me in the ribs. "Ten bucks they are cuddling."

"Ten bucks someone is dead." I answered back.

"You're on!"

* * *

><p>Songs used in this chapter include:

A short mention of: Wonderwall by Oasis (song on the IPod)

10. Falling Wisteria: Comatose

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

This Chapter bases its title off fallingwisteria, who again has a great fic about Saito and her OC Aoi called Blue Moon, check it out! Thanks for taking time out of your writing to read my fic and comment on it like you do, fallingwisteria. And thank you to everyone else who reads and or inputs for Umarekawaru.

Chapter 9

~Falling Wisteria; Comatose~

"There. Was. No. Cuddling!" I shouted for the last time at Shukke and her ridiculous insinuations.

"You give him a black eye and then don't compensate?" Shinpachi asked with a laugh.

"Nee nee, how could you even land a punch on Saito?" Heisuke asked, even though I swear we answered all these questions already.

"I didn't move." Saito answered wearily.

"How could you just punch a rock star in the face anyway?" That one was Harada, to whom I answered, "You play in the dark!"

"Might not have this week." Okita suggested.

"Oh that's such bullshit," Cat announced.

"Yeah well," Souji put an arm around Cat only to have her shrug away, "Now you'll never know."

"Hands off, Souji."

"Oh-o, first name basis huh, Okita?" I jibed

"We had a talk." He told me serenely.

"Yeah, tell her about how you were straddling Cat in the park." Shinpachi chuckled, catching the punch Cat threw at him. She was about to try again but the doorbell rang, followed by a knock.

"I'll get it!" Both me and Cat yelled at the same time, trying to find a way out of the situation. We both raced to the door, but I beat her to the handle.

Jerking the door open I saw a rail thin guy my age with a beard and long black hair standing there, arms crossed delicately so that the spiked cuffs at his wrists didn't stab him.

"Steve!" I shouted happily.

"Hey Ryane, I saw you at the battle, thought I would stop by and say hi. Can I come in?"

"A vampire has to be invited into a mortal's house Ryane, don't do it!"

"Cat, shut up, he is a friend from high school." I quipped playfully at her.

"Oh, you were sitting next to Ryane at the battleâ€¦a friend?" He asked me.

"Ya this is Cat. Ignore her, come on in."

At this Cat booked it to the living room shouting, "Shukke get the stakes and garlic, we are all gonna die!"

"Who's Shukke?" Steve asked, confused.

"Our other roomie, she was at the show too."

"Oh, the little girl or the mulatto?"

"The Shukke." I answered with a flourish to my friend sitting on the couch between Umarekawaru's two drummers.

"You have a lot of friends over, should I come back later?" Steve asked as his eyes swept the group, stopping briefly on Saito's unwelcoming face.

"Dude," Steve directed at Hajime, who was still glaring slightly. "What is your issue?"

"He doesn't like competition." Okita said with a chuckle.

"Your voice is familiar but I can't place it." Steve said, swinging to face Okita.

"We saw you at the show."

"Funny I didn't see you there, any of you." Steve looked amongst the Shinsengumi trying to add it all up.

"No one really saw us." Heisuke hinted playfully.

"No way!" Steve exclaimed in surprise. "You're that Uma band."

"Ah so he can think." Saito said thickly.

"Be nice." I warned.

"Ah he speaks." Steve snarked. "Thought you might be resting that golden voice of yours."

This time I warned Steve, "Be nice."

"Got a question," Steve shot at Hajime. "That publicity tripe about your reason for being in a band, what did that even mean? Being the best kind of giver, what money you make is gonna go to charity or something?"

"Ask Ryane." Hajime told him. "It's her right to tell or not." He turned to face my blushing face and bowed from where he was sitting.

"I gotta hear this." Steve told me.

"Me too actually." The others one by one agreed.

"Hajime and I were talking before bed one night," I began, remembering the conversation that had sparked this. "He asked me what I thought of people who made music, and I told him I thought they were the best kind of givers, because music gives me comfort and peace. I had forgotten that conversation."

"That is my reason for being in a band." Saito asserted. "Ry-chan, it is almost two o'clock."

"Oh, shit, yeah it is," I confirmed with a glance at the wall clock. "Come on Steve lets walk, they were planning to practice at two."

"That's fine, I will walk home now."

"I feel bad, let me go part way with you." I pleaded. "Or me and Cat are headed to the park around practice times usually, if you want we will be dueling."

"Dueling? Like Magic the Gathering or Yu-gay-o?" Steve asked, interested in spite of himself.

"No, with swords." I patted the sword on my belt loop, not knowing how he could have missed it all this time. "As long as she doesn't bring the garlic," I called as I saw said Neko head towards the kitchen.

"Busted!" Shinpachi said with a grin.

"Butâ€¦" Cat began timidly.

"Oh for God's sake, I am _not_ a vampire!" Steve basically exploded. "I actually like garlic anyway."

Cat had actually warmed up to my high school friend by the time we got to the park, even though he might have been plotting to kill her after she repeatedly called him 'Edward' and then called him 'Cullen' when he got pissed at being called the wrong name and Edward had not been a big enough clue that she was referencing Twilight.

When we reached our usual clearing across a few bridges, she immediately drew her sword, causing Steve to shout in surprise and stumble backwards. She ignored him and charged me. I dodged her original attack and drew with a bit of speed to parry her second thrust. We were pressed together vying for strength against each other when the usual cheers from neighborhood kids sounded off. I rolled to the side away from her blades trajectory and deflected the blow she countered my movement with, shocking the blade out of her hand where it spun and landed point in the mud five feet away.

"Again." She demanded withdrawing her sword from the muck and flicking the dirt off it.

"When are you going to admit," I asked tapping the flat of my own sword against my shoulder, a cocky hand on my hip, "that my Sensei is better than yours?"

"I wouldn't lie to you like that. It isn't nice." Cat spat out.

It was all an act for the kids, but Cat, even pretending, was fun to rile up.

"Prove it. Come at me." And she did, this time with a feint to the left before stabbing towards my right hip quickly. Swinging away from her attack easily I blocked her side swipe and waited for an opening in her defenses. When it came I thrust my blade towards the hollow of her throat, stopping inches from her flesh. In response she dropped her blade and yielded.

We continued for a couple hours after that, Cat won three times out of dozens, Steve and the kids watching transfixed on our movements. After those couple hours we both bowed low to each other and sheathed up a final time, causing the kids to moan, disappointed. Just to show off I walked up to the usual tree and drew my sword as quick as I could, slashing deeply into the bark. The kids cheered but fell quiet prematurely, causing me to look behind me.

Hajime was rushing me, sword out. Out of reflex I ducked to the left bringing my sword up in time to stop his attack. It was a close thing though. For a brief second I feared he would actually cut me, but with so many kids around I figured he wouldn't in the end.

With his vastly superior strength, Saito pushed me back till I was against the tree I had cut. Still having enough strength to hold me against it with one hand, he reached his right hand out and traced the lines I had marked on the tree over the last couple months. There was a tenderness on his face that gave way to a melancholy sort of anger.

"It is dying." He informed me lightly. "I will end its suffering."

"How areâ€¦" I began, but he interrupted me.

"I haven't done this since we got here anyway. Move away." His command sounded cold and distant and I obeyed it instantly.

When I was away Hajime sheathed his sword and stood before the tree with that same angry yet melancholy expression. A few seconds later I heard the hiss of his sword leaving its sheath but no matter that I was staring intently at him, his sword was back in its home without having seemed to move at all, and the tree was sliding off its stump.

"Holy shit." Steve remarked, a look of terror and at the same time respect marked his face and eyes. "All of a sudden I don't want to know about that bruise."

I was about to laugh when Hajime came up to me and grabbed my wrist roughly, dragging me home. "Do not do that again," he told me quietly. "I am not teaching you so you can kill. Not even a tree."

Steve was still trying to keep up when I replied "Yes, Saito-Sensei." At which point he dropped back, shocked.

"That's her teacher?" I heard him ask Cat, I assume she nodded behind me because he asked, "And you think yours is better?"

"He is." Hajime called back, "Both in skill and as a teacher if his pupil is not doing things like this." I flinched.

* * *

><p>Saito hadn't spoken to me much since the incident in the park and he had been sleeping in the living room. Leave it to say, I felt like shit. The park maintenance had removed the tree stump that Saito had left and somehow it felt lonely to be in the area it had stood in. "Just plant a tree there in the spring." Shukke told me from my doorway two days after. "Anyway the guys are gonna practice and want you gone for some reason."<p>

"Wait, what?" Divine punishment, not wanted anymore; uprooted. "I'll go for a walk with Cat then."

"She was requested to stay." There was something almost pitying about Shukke's face that I couldn't stand so I immediately grabbed my jacket and ran out of the house.

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

"What did you tell her?" Saito sounded mad, though I couldn't guess why, he had said get her out of the house for practice. So I told him and he sighed. "We can't not practice while I go explain and I need both of you girls to help us today, it will have to be a surprise."

"Surprise?" I asked, intrigued. And as he explained, I felt like a total ass. "I thought you were mad at her."

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

It was the night of the second battle. I had tried to stay home because each day that week I had been told to leave for practice and Saito had not talked to me still, but Shukke dragged me. I even had to drive. Maybe that's why she made me come.

The bands' performances would be in order of rank, backwards. So when everyone got settled in the announcers got on stage and announced Falling Wisteria, and I felt a little bad for Steve, until I heard their song. It was pissed._ Maybe if he stopped being so mad they might get some votes._

Raven's Cry was third from last, playing another catchy tune that would probably be stuck in my head all day. That's when I got a shock. The next band called forward was Umarekawaru. They weren't number one. 14Phantom was. _Serves em right_. I shocked myself with the thought. Was I really that mad? Even though he was angry at me through no fault of his own, but because of something I had done myself? _Yes._

The lights went out like last time and feet shuffled onstage.

"A bit of an announcement." I heard Souji call into his mic. "Our vocalist wrote this song this week to someone very important to him. He made her cry and he blames himself for going too far. He put his heart into it, and hopefully that reaches you. It's called _Comatose._ The only reason I say this rather than him is 'cause it's my week to introduce and say: my reason for doing this is because killing people is illegal. And she wouldn't talk to me if I scared her again."

Sannan began the song with his keyboard, then the music came full swing. After a few bars Hajime began.

_I hate feelin' like this
>I'm so tired of tryin' to fight this
I'm asleep and all I dream of is waking to you
>Girls started screaming in response to the heartfelt opening.

_Tell me that you will listen
>Your touch is what I'm missin'
And the more I hide I realize I'm slowly losin' you_

_Comatose
>I'll never wake up without an overdose of you

Was he really singing this to me? Or was I misunderstanding?

_I don't wanna live
>I don't wanna breathe
'less I feel you next to me
>You take the pain I feel
(Wakin' up to you never felt so real)_ Souji's rougher but still alluring voice rang out in counter chorus._

>_I don't wanna sleep
>I don't wanna dream
Cause my dreams don't comfort me
>The way you make me feel
(Wakin' up to you never felt so

real)_

Surely he meant as a friendâ€¦I was the 'just friends' girl after all.

_Breathing life
>Waking up
My eyes
>Open up

For the briefest of seconds the lights flared on and I saw Hajime looking right at me for those milliseconds. His gaze piercing me with its intensity.

_Comatose
>I'll never wake without an overdose of you

_I don't wanna live
>I don't wanna breathe
'less I feel you next to me
>You take the pain I feel
(Wakin' up to you never felt so real)_ _

>_I don't wanna sleep
>I don't wanna dream
Cause my dreams don't comfort me
>The way you make me feel
(Wakin' up to you never felt so real)_

_Oh how I adore you
>Wakin' up to you never felt so real
Oh how I thirst for you

>Wakin' up to you never felt so real
Oh how I adore you_

_Oh_
>The way you make me feel
>Wakin' up to you never felt so real

Sannan leaned on the keyboard, playing one long note and then the lights flashed on and on stage was a poster board saying, "Aishiteru." I looked around the crowd, morbidly curious about the reaction, and my face wasn't the only teary one. Girls all started with the 'awwws' and cheers of support.

"Guess you won't be banging him after allâ€¦" One of the girls from last battle told her friend even over the increasing noise of Umarekawaru fans.

"Could be a close friend or something." The girl she was teasing announced hopefully.

"Did you hear his voice, there is no way he's not in love with that girl." I rolled my eyes again and faced forward. Hajime Saito would not be in love with me.

14Phantom was called to the stage next and the girl who had had pink hair walked out in purple locks with purple butterfly clips jangling as she moved. "Hey we are 14Phantom, last week's top competitors. Vote for us." She peace signed. "This is our next song _Want U Back._"

And to start the song she _grunted_.

14Phantom finished up with the lead singer doing a weird helicopter

noise. "Thank you Good night!" She called energetically.

"Well now!" One of the announcers began, "the judges are having trouble gauging your response, so let's hear it one more time for Umarekawaruâ€¦" And the crowd, myself included began to scream and clap and chant and ring cowbells for some reason. I swear my throat would die.

"Alright, alright." The announcer's counterpart called out, silencing the crowd. "And let's hear it for 14Phantom!" And it might have been me but the crowd was not as loud. "Alright while the judges tally scores let me announce that next battle will be a Challenge Battle, extra points for completing the challenge. Your task: should you choose to accept itâ€¦"

The first announcer picked up the thread of the conversation. "Remake a popular song from pop or hip hop in the past ten years."

"And this week's winner is: Let me seeâ€¦" They popped open an envelope and read together, "The heartfelt Umarekawaru!"

"Thank you, for your votes and support." I heard Saito say with what sounded like wind in the background.

"Is he outside?" One announcer asked, shocked. A mass of girls got out of their seats and ran for the door. "Run man, run!" The announcer shouted.

"I am somewhere they cannot reach." Saito said with a chuckle.

"Hey, hey," Heisuke could be heard in the background. "I can seeâ€¦" And the microphone clicked off.

"Well that's all for now, folks." An announcer tried to gain attention back from the few people left inside and through the speakers outside.

We had to wait in the bus four blocks away from the venue for the Shinsengumi to climb across roofs to escape their rabid fans. It was lucky that Harada had 'stolen' Shukke's cell phone so they could call and tell us the plan.

I drove home, not wanting to face Hajime with a bunch of people sitting around listening, and I can only hope he understood that. The guys were teasing Souji for his mention of Cat on the mic anyway.

Is it weird that I am used to them now? It's like I never want them to leave, or this to end.

Songs used in this chapter include:

Comatose by Skillet (Umarekawaru's song)

Want U Back by Cher Llyod (Briefly referenced as 14Phantom's song)

11. Intermission 2: Doki Doki It Pounds

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 10<p>

~Intermission 2; Doki Doki It Pounds~

It was much later that evening that I left the safety of the pack for bed, a part of me was nervous that Hajime would sleep in the living room again, but most of me was scared of what he would say if he got me alone. Most of the evening had been spent talking about the Challenge, and whether or not they would chose to participate in it.

"It would be madness not to." That was the general conclusion.

"Madness!?" Shukke shouted after the discussion, "This. Is. Sparta!" And then she collapsed in a fit of giggles off to the side while Cat and I explained the reference to confused ancient samurai. We ended up watching the movie to cover our bases and that took way too long, so I was dragging my feet as I headed to bed.

It was disappointing in the end that Saito never came up to my room. Even if I didn't really want to talk it had been way too long since I had woken up to him sitting across from my bed. _Comatose, I'll never wake up without an overdose of you__._

Usually he would be pretending to sleep, I could never make heads or tails of why. I did wake up to something softly fragrant on the pillow next to me, which when I saw the flower and a note on the pillow next to me I was a bit shocked. I was a light sleeper, I should have woken up with someone putting something that close to me.

I picked the iris up first, twirling it lightly between my fingertips, surprised at the water dripping onto my hands as I did so. It was put on my pillow recently at least. Next I read the note:

**I am cooking breakfast if you're interested.
>I didn't want to bother you last night, you looked displeased, but I need to explain.
Please come down;
>Hajime.

I didn't have much of a choice. I mean I could have stayed up here and sulked, but I really did want to know why he had written and performed a song that had the audience thinking he was in love with me when he had been ignoring me for the majority of the week.

What decided it was the sound of Superchick's Stand In The Rain playing from my dock, reminding me of when I was really sad and Hajime singing it to me. He was a nice guy, he had a good reason. I just had to have enough courage to find out what that reason was.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, a delicious scent wafted to me. It had been a long time since I had eaten breakfast or breakfast foods. I had half expected to have fish and rice for breakfast but turning the corner I saw eggs, pancakes, and sausage.

Cat must have warned him at some point against cooking her bacon. I think she would have killed him if she woke up to her bacon gone. Though it was a bit puzzling that she wasn't down here already. In fact, everyone was still asleep it seemed. I must have looked confused, because Hajime explained when he turned to face me. "I had everyone go out so it could be just the two of us."

"Such power of persuasion," I quipped.

"The trick is making them think they have the upper hand." He informed me casually.

"Is that why you're cooking breakfast, Saito?"

"Yes, and the flowerâ€¦Shukke told me irises were your favorite, though I guess I am in more trouble than I thought if you are calling me Saito." He made a face of annoyance before smoothing his features calmly once more. "Should I call you Bell-san?"

"Depends on the reason behind such a heartfelt song after ignoring me all week. I was driven out of the house by Shukke each day. I barely saw you after what happened in the park. Aren't you mad at me?" I knew I was ranting but I was so mad at the two sidedness of this that I exploded. "It was wrong, what I did, but if you're using me for something so help me Godâ€¦"

"How would I be using you?" It sounded like he wanted me to go through the laundry list, and I was all too happy to oblige.

"A place to live for one." I began with the obvious. "Publicity, a girl you like can give you all sorts of reactions. Even protection from outrageous female fans. Everyone loves a sap story too, you could go at the angle of me not liking you and gain sympathy."

"You, Shukke and Cat would be kind enough to let us live here without me writing a song about you." He interrupted my ranting kindly but firmly. "As for publicity of any kind, we play in the dark. Never mind the reasons of proving ourselves to one of your friends by doing so, but do you honestly think we are overly concerned about what the fans are thinking about us, about our love lives? Furthermore, I would never use you for a sympathy angle in a way I believe to be untrue anyway." My jaw dropped open at that.

That no good, stupid, arrogant, all too clever samurai. I should roast him alive. "How do you figure I want anything to do with you?"

He turned off the stove and walked right up to me, grabbing me in his arms and pulling me close. "Because," he said quietly, "You're blushing, and your heart is racing. I can almost hear it beat, and I can certainly feel it between your clothes and mine. It beats in time with mine. Can't you feel it too?"

I hesitated in answering, and he pulled away from me, a melancholy look on his face, like when he cut down the tree. "You don't have to

acknowledge it now. I have plenty of patience; I can wait. Just please, don't call me that less familiar name again. I am not very good at this sort of thing. I have never confessed these sorts of feelings to another person. I worked so hard to make a song that would please you I forgot to pay attention to you. Forgive me."

His look of utter sincerity made me giggle, and before I knew it I was laughing loud and hard. "Oh shit," I exclaimed at his devastated expression, "I wasn't laughing at you. Just at my life. I have never had someone tell me anything so sincerely. I will work hard to understand that good things do happen; that dreams do come true. That way I will be more fit to be with you."

"I will wait on your mindset then, Ry-chan. For now, this is enough. Now the foods getting cold, so we should eat I think."

* * *

><p>In the bushes out the kitchen window, Hijikata elbowed his green eyed companion while the others ate in a diner miles away. "Your turn."<p>

"Yeah, yeah. Comin' right up."

"Liar," Hijikata teased softly.

"Yeah, probably. It will take time."

"Don't chicken out." Hijikata advised.

"Yeah right. You know me."

* * *

><p>Cat's Point Of View:<p>

We were at the Mount Hope Family Diner. Ryane's family's usual haunt, but thankfully they weren't here right now. We left the house with too many people for even the large round tables that sat in the center of the room, but as we piled into our seats around one I noticed we had dropped a few pounds.

"Where are Souji and Hijikata?" I asked more out of duty than because I really cared.

"I am pretty sure they stayed behind to spy on Saito-san and Bell-san's conversation." Chizuru admitted timidly. _Great._

"Well maybe they will tell us the details." Shinpachi said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"It's none of your business," Shukke exclaimed, thwacking him on the arm from across the table, but she had that playful glint in her eye that told me she was just as curious about what was going on at home with Ryane and Saito.

"Spare me," I prayed out loud.

"What was that Neko Neko?" Shukke asked me playfully, eying me with a teasing expression on her lightly made up face. _Seriously who wears

make up to breakfast?_

"You heard me." I snapped as the waitress walked up to take our orders.

"What can I get you?" She asked in a way too perky voice.

"Less nosey friends," I told her, to which she gave me a weird look.

All throughout breakfast my thoughts kept returning to a certain green eyed monster and it surprised me that, while I usually remembered him in my mind's eye with cold, distant eyes now he now had that same warm gaze as when he asked me to call him 'Souji'.

Sincerity. That's what his eyes held at that time. Let's face it, he still scared the ever living shit out of me, but I had to admit he wasn't all that bad. Take away the sword and he was nice enough.

Unconsciously, my hand went to the hilt of the sword he was letting me borrow. He was teaching me to use it. Like he was bridging the gap between my world and his. For the first time since it was proven to me that Ryane wasn't on crack and that these guests were who she said they were, I wondered what it was like leaving everything behind and coming forward to a time with only seven of your friends and a memory of something more. Had they left loved ones behind? What had it been like to die? To be reborn?

Umarekawaruâ€¦ To be reborn. With a band name like that I bet most people figured they were born again Christians or something. Who would believe the truth?

I bet there was someone left behind. In unguarded moments, few and far between as they were, Souji seemed devastatingly lonely, even surrounded by the people he came forward with.

"Cat, you've been stabbing at an empty plate for five minutes." Shukke's voice reached through the haze of my thoughts with what sounded like concern. "We are getting ready to leave now."

I grabbed the keys from the center of the table and let Shukke pay the bill. Saito would probably insist on paying her back when they made it big but to be honest I don't think she would care either way. She was too giving.

The drive home I focused on the road, letting my thoughts wander only once and nearly getting us in an accident. We got home with little incident otherwise, and found Souji and Hijikata waiting in the bushes with less than happy looks on their faces. Guess she turned him down. Shukke was frowning.

The Shinsengumi turned rock band went to confirm the situation with their vice commander and I stayed in the bus. It really wasn't our business what went on between those two. If they wanted us to know something about what was going on, they could tell us themselves.

It took me a minute to realize Souji was standing at the closed door to the bus. "Did you need something, Souji?"

"I was wondering when we were going to go out." He announced with his usual smirk.

"Who did you leave behind?" I asked, ignoring his cocky question.

"What?" The confusion was clear on his face, but in his eyes there was that fierce loneliness and a burning rage that shocked me. I didn't think he would answer, but then he said, "_I_ wasn't the one who left Kondou-san behind." His tone was vicious and before I could ask more he stormed away, barreling past a concerned and then confused looking Chizuru. _I think it's time to watch that stupid anime._

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

"What happened to him?" I asked Hijikata as Okita rushed past everyone and into the house.

"He said he was going to ask Cat out, I assume things did not go well." The sound of breaking glass came from inside and the long haired vice commander and I ran in to assess what was going on. Souji had thrown a china plate to the floor, a look of savage anger and something that seemed tinged of abandonment lighting his face. He focused that look on someone directly behind me and I heard Chizuru give a strangled gasp.

"She asked," He announced to the Oni girl, "Who I left behind. Like _I_ made the choice to leave Kondou-san dead! But it wasn't me! He should be here! I need him here! Why isn't he here?" Okita's hands kept clenching and unclenching into and out of tight fists, his eyebrows scrunching up and a demented look entering his eyes as Cat walked in the door.

He saw the look of pity, confused but clear, on her face and he turned away. Knowing the man was as close to crying as he would ever let anyone see I turned and walked away, not surprised that everyone but Cat followed me out of the house and to the bus.

The last thing I heard from him before leaving was the question directed at Cat, "What? Not scared?"

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

What? Not scared?

"Not right now, no." I told him shocked at the truth of the statement. _When had I stopped being scared of him so thoroughly._ Oh that's rightâ€¦ when feelings got involved.

"Why are you still here? I don't have any use for your pity."

"Look." I started out uncertainly, "I am not like Ryane and Shukke. I haven't watched the show they did. I don't know all the stuff they

know about the Shinsengumi. So I'm sorry, but I don't know who Kondou-san is. But I can tell he meant a lot to you." I was creeping closer and closer to him when he turned, hand on his katana, tears rolling unimpeded from his unguarded eye. Lost, lonely, weak spirited eyes that didn't suit him. Closing the gap between us I instinctively wrapped my arms around him, holding his head to my chest and stroking his hair in what I hoped seemed a calming gesture rather than a patronizing one.

"You know," He informed me when he had calmed down enough to look me in the eye, a faint glimmer of humor shining in his green orbs, "If you tell anyone I just cried in your arms I will have to kill you."

"I won't betray you or your confidence."

"I know," He told me, his eyes seeming more like themselves now, if only a tad bit warmer. "Kondou-san would have like that I made friends with someone new. He would have liked you." His expression altered briefly to one of deep longing, a yearning that hit me hard, but just like that it was gone again. "You should watch that show you were talking about though."

"Don't feel like explaining yourself, Souji?" I asked softly.

"I'm not that into going into the past." He explained, throwing an arm around my shoulder and smirking. _Ah that's the Souji Okita I know._ "So about that dateâ€¦"

* * *

><p>Read+Review if you please.

12. Raven's Cry: Lollipop

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

This Chapter gets half of its name from the band based off of Ravenscry21, the pen name of a very helpful reviewer. I encourage people to check out her page and see if there is any fic's that they might like. Thank you for reviewing regularly...This one's for you!

Chapter 11

~Raven's Cry; Lollipop~

"From the top." Hijikata demanded his eyes darting to the window in front of the band, staring exasperatedly at the bushes.

Every time he called for a section to be replayed he would send a look to those bushes, but the one time I went to go see why, he just sent me a glare that told me to sit my merry ass back down.

A slow, deep pounding came from Shinpachi and Harada before Hijikata played a note on his bass.

_Yo check it out I've got a plan
>Here's my intention HAHA!
The frat boys in the club are lame

>Let's start an altercation
It's just what I'm used to
>Just want to fuck shit up
I've got my whole damn crew
>Come on what you gonna do?

Even though Saito was singing about kissing guys his voice crooning like that was sexy as hell.

_I kissed a boy and they liked it
>Got all the honeys in the club excited
I kissed a boy just to start shit
>That homeboy was not about it.

_I know it's wrong, but I don't mind
>I'm gonna start shit tonight
I kissed a boy just to start shit

>Bitches loved it.

They wrapped the song up for a final time this practice and Hijikata and the others intentionally turned their backs on the window and knowing we were expected to, me and Cat did so as well as Chizuru and Shukke went to the kitchen for drinks. I wasn't exactly sure why we were turning away, or why the constant glares had been sent to the bushes but I figured I would find out eventually.

The song was definitely different than what I was used to hearing from Umarekawaru, but with the challenge I didn't expect anything to sound like they usually played. To be honest the content was more what I would have expected from Raven's Cry though.

I had told Hajime as much but his response was just to give his little grin and say, "Is it really now?" Whatever they were planning, Cat and I were not privy to it. And I doubted even Chizuru knew. Shukke seemed to have figured it out because before she went into the kitchen to get tea for everyone she would roll her eyes towards the window.

Cat had been staying to watch practice after having been forced to help out with Comatose so we had been going out to duel in the park after the band was finished. At first the kids had stood out from two until we got there, waiting for us, and feeling bad we announced to them we would be starting later from now on. Today though, as we put on light jackets and boots with good treads, Saito and Okita got ready beside us.

"And where do you think you're going?" Cat asked them while she zipped up her coat and placed her hand on the door handle.

"Well," Okita answered her, "There is this park about two miles away and we hear these babes practice with their swords there."

"And?" She asked when he fell silent.

"And," Hajime continued for him, "We thought we would test their skill, if only for a little while."

"Uh-huhâ€¦" I said with a dangerous grin. "Well I hear they are

pretty exclusive, theseâ€¦babes. I don't know if they would let you practice with them."

"I'm sure we could entice them somehow, they would definitely learn a thing or two." Saito practically crooned.

"That's what she said!" Cat shouted; ruining my little daydream moment before it could begin.

"When we win, you are not allowed to say that for two weeks." He informed her bluntly, causing her to grimace. I hadn't even noticed it but we were already outside and heading to the park.

As I zipped my coat, Cat cackled. "Finally realized we were outside, eh chick?" Nodding I slipped my hands in my pockets and watched wide eyed as Okita plucked Cat's left hand out of her jacket and held it. At first she tried to pull away but he glanced over at her and told her, "My hands are freezing, let me hold yours till they warm up." And she stopped struggling and accepted his hand in hers.

I noticed Hajime's eyes on me and chuckled. "Don't even think about it." I warned him.

"Alas," He responded, "I am not as forward as Souji, I was just trying to see by your reaction if you knew about them or not."

"Wait, hold up! Knew about them?" My voice was a shocked whisper.

"I have my suspicions." Saito confirmed. "That is why he asked me to gauged her progress in his stead, I assume. He thinks he'll go easy on her."

"Does that mean I will be dueling Okita?" I asked, groaning when Hajime nodded.

"Do you really think he is that much better than me?" Hajime sounded affronted, but his eyes danced with humor. He was definitely a man who needed no reassurance to his own prowess in anything.

Stopping all of a sudden Hajime rooted around in the small book bag he had for a notebook and pen and began writing something down.

"Anything good?" Souji asked him, having noticed the halt.

"Just a bit for that song I told you about last time, the melody that keeps popping in my head."

"Ah, sing a bit for me I know you have words too right?" Souji looked at the two of us suggestively.

"I would rather not," Hajime told him.

"What shy? They will hear it in practice anyway, unless you plan to kick her out again." Souji looked behind the vocalist, "Oh I see." Behind us walked a group of high school students thoroughly bundled in scarfs and jackets so that only their eyes were visible.

The one in front stopped and looked at the swords at each of our

belts Turning to Cat he said, "Hey you're the girls my little brother watches every day at the park down the road. He's always going about this black chick and how she's wicked with a blade. Mind if we watch too? Or is your performance just for little kids."

"Yeah," Cat offered, not noticing Souji's dark look. "We are headed there now if you wanna come along."

"Cool." The leader intoned and they all joined us, chatting lively with Cat and myself.

"So," A girl asked cheerfully, "Are these hotties your students or what."

"Nah," I said, noticing Souji prickle a little, hand on his sword, "They are the masters, we are the pupils."

"They must be pretty good than." She didn't sound convinced, causing Hajime to subtle step between Okita and the girl. _Is she needling them on purpose?_ They acted like she was, but why would she. My thoughts went back to the bushes.

We made it to the park without any major incident and Okita paired up across from me. He looked like a pissed guy with something to prove, which I figure with all the comments pointed at him and Hajime on the way here he was.

Without much warning he streaked towards me, sword out in a slash angling to cut my right side. Hajime must have seen the angry look in his eye because he flew in to greet Okita's blade with his own a pace in front of me. It was surprising to see, but as calm as Hajime usually was he looked annoyed, and not at Souji.

"Back up Ry-chan," he grated out at me, using all his strength to hold Okita back. I ran over to Cat as their blades flashed and Okita pushed the other samurai away.

At that moment, the high school students that had walked with us unzipped their coats and pulled out some guns and aimed them at Souji and Hajime. Cat, not seeing that they were actually paintball guns, screamed.

"Oh, get down, you idiot!" I called pulling her with me as I noticed the girl in the group aiming at me and my friend. I watched as the kids fired their paint at the two Shinsengumi members but was shocked when Souji moved to the left blocking the path of the bullets of paint headed for me and Cat while both he and Hajime blocked each pellet with their blades; their katana weaving in intricate paths.

When the first cartridges were empty they both flashed forward and cut the guns in half at top speed while the teens stood terrified of the swords now glistening with paint.

"Get out of here!" Souji yelled at the closest teen, anger the predominant emotion in his eyes. "And don't go near them again!" He continued to yell pointing at me and Cat, "If Raven's Cry has an issue with us, they can come after US, not the girls. You hear me?"

The kids, all of whom were wearing shirts supporting the band Raven's Cry nodded and then bolted away from the park in absolute fear.

"They were after us?" I asked, shocked.

"Yeah, that's why we came today, they were watching you two when we were practicing, not us." Hajime explained quietly.

"Now," Okita announced to no one in particular, "Where were we?"

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

Those bitches shot paint at us! I could pretty much slaughter their whole class I was so mad. Souji said something about Raven's Cryâ€¦ Do they really want to start something? I'll shove my foot so far up theirâ€¦ "Cat?"

Stopping my thoughts I looked across my sword to Hajime, who was dueling me to see my progress. "You're distracted and losing, and I am not even trying to accomplish either of those states. If it's about those teenagers, let it go. They will probably try again but we Shinsengumi are sharp enough to know when people are up to something."

He easily pushed his blade against mine, shoving me back and away from him. "I just don't see why they would go after us if they are mad at the band." I admitted sullenly.

"Because you are dear to us." His explanation was unlaced by emotion, just a statement of fact.

"Yeah, maybe to you and Souji, butâ€¦"

"You're wrong. We all care about you two, and Shukke as well. You're our cherished friends. Shukke just doesn't make herself an easy target because she stays home more often than not." He easily deflected a slashed I aimed for his left calf before continuing. "You should focus on the swords now though, I am about to increase the level." And without waiting for me to acknowledge anything he said, Saito sheathed his sword and faced me. Souji had never sheathed his sword in front of me, so I wasn't sure how to react.

Hajime just stood there, expectant, with both hands at his sides. Minutes passed while I debated. Giving up all sense I rushed him, letting out a cry and slashing at him, barely registering Ryane's laugh and Souji calling out, "You cut her I cut you, you bastard."

These were just little side events as I reached Saito and felt my sword fly out of my hand with much more force than Ryane had ever managed and the cold of his sword radiating from the steel he held, still as a stone, flush against my neck. I felt like if I even swallowed I would be cut. The kids from the neighborhood were dead silent for a moment before they began to cheer, punching the air and stomping the ground with their feet from where they stood. Saito backed off and told Souji, "You should teach your pupil to clear her mind better. Other than that, I have no complaints."

That was the last thing I heard before I blacked out.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"You made her faint." Okita pointed out, slightly surprised. There was a wide smile on his face. "I think it's finally time for me to learn that technique, it could prove useful."

"And why would you need to make her pass out, Okita?" I asked, the calm in my voice belying my suspicions. He just smirked and changed the subject.

"I think I have to take care of my pupil now though, Hajime-kun, so you're gonna have to test your own."

"Very well," Hajime accepted with a calm expression. "It won't have been the first time I have had my sword to her throat."

"That's what she said." I deadpanned since Cat was passed out like a wuss and could not.

"Not you too," Hajime growled.

"What? She couldn't say it herself" I pointed out with an innocent smile.

"Draw." He commanded, trying to act unaffected, but I knew he was amused. It showed in his eyes.

"Uh-uh, you're gonna come at me." I said with a cocky grin on my lips.

"You're not faster than me." He reminded me, the amusement in his eyes spreading to his lips.

"I don't have to be faster," I told him. "Just have to be fast enough." Without warning he started running at me, his katana still sheathed. Three paces in front of me his hand went to the hilt of it. Two paces away he began to draw. When he was right in front of me I dropped like a sack of potatoes and rolled to the right, ending up behind him. From there I rolled to my feet and flashed my own sword out, intent on cutting him as I knew I would have to be, hesitation would get me killed, because all of a sudden Hajime seemed way too serious.

He spun with his attack bringing his sword to meet mine seconds before it slashed through to his spine. The force of our clashing blades jolted up to my shoulder but I held on for dear life. He parried through the strike before his blade flashed back into his sheath and he jumped back a step, only to rush me again and draw. I was not prepared this time though and as Souji ran to intercept him, Hajime's blade flashed out and the tip of it raced past my neck into the air above my right shoulder. Still in motion he grabbed my left hand with his right and pulled me in to him.

His lips crashed into mine as I held perfectly still, confused, a deer in the headlights. Belatedly I responded to that pressure on my

lips. Dropping my borrowed sword to the ground I kissed him back without much thought to any consequences. I could feel the flat of the katana he wielded against me pressed to my back as he wrapped his left arm around me.

Cat, who seemed to be feeling better whistled at us, causing him to remember, Hey there are people around, and he pulled away, an apologetic look on his face.

"I thought you said you weren't forward." I reminded with a bit of a grin.

"Ah, noâ€¦" He corrected. "Just not as forward as Souji."

"Well done. Well done." The other, more forward, samurai teased. "Since you're in the clouds right now, I will judge the swordsmanship of Bell-san, Hajime-kun. And since she almost had you there I'll say she passed."

"She was nowhere close to cutting me." Hajime protested.

"well, she surprised you, dropping like that." Okita said, crossing his arms in satisfaction. "The look on your face changed anyway. Haven't seen that since we fought at the battle ofâ€¦"

"Souji!" Hajime called, "Shut up." To which the green eyed man stopped talking, thusly reminded that talking about the past was never really a good idea.

* * *

><p>The walk home, Souji made fun of Cat for fainting, and Cat refused to hold his hand because of that. Hajime and I walked side by side, not touching. Sometimes he would look over at me and offer a personal smile, always laced with apology. I decided I would tell him later how little I minded. I guess good things do happen.

It was the day of the third battle and Shukke, Cat and I were kicked out of the house for practice. Shukke grabbed the keys to our ride, subtly reminding Cat and me how unsafe it was at the park when we were alone. The teen supporters of Raven's Cry had hounded us each day we went to the park, though they hadn't acted menacingly. I figured it was because the guys were there too, and seeing as how their actions had worked so well for them that first time, they were waiting for a Shinsengumi-less opening.

And so we got in the metal lunchbox on wheels and headed to the mall. Seeing how crowded it was in there, we just sat in the bus and talked, making the rent-a-cops anxious.

"So," Shukke began, leaning in to me where we all sat on the same seat, "Cat tells me you and Saito kissed." _Blunt much?_

"Cat~" I whined. "How could you tell Shukke?"

"It just came out."

"Uh-huh," I retorted eloquently, annoyed at what I felt was a betrayal of trust.

"Does that mean your state of mind has been settled, Kiri-nee?" Shukke probed with a smile.

"How do you know about that?" I kind of didn't want to know to be honest.

"Hijikata and Okita." She admitted. When I looked confused she explained further. "They hid in the bushes outside the kitchen window while you and Saito were talking about it."

The litany of swear words that sprang from my mouth was pretty clear evidence about how I felt on that. "You and Chizuru better get your men." I warned Cat.

"Don't know what you're talking about." Cat muttered trying to evade the Shukke probe.

"Yeah, sureâ€¦who were you holding hands with every day to the park?" I snapped, triumph in my eyes.

"Ryane! What the hell!" I almost laughed at her in reply as Shukke fired up.

"It just came out." I deadpanned.

"So Shukke-" I asked when they had both calmed down. "Why are we out of the house for practice? I know you know so don't act all innocent."

"They are practicing the song for the third battle." And that's all the answer we got.

Night fell and about an hour after that we headed back home to pick up the guys and their gear. Nine o'clock found us at the venue supporting the battles and once again we were separated. The announcers came out and re-explained that tonight was a challenge night and that extra points would be awarded.

Again Falling Wisteria came out first, and for the first time announced something before they began playing. "Fuck your challenge!" And again they played an original, though admittedly rough song. The ranks dwindled down till the third from last band came on. Raven's Cry walked on stage to a bunch of cheering.

"We wanna dedicate this to the band that gave us the idea. It's a remake of a newer pop favorite from the great and talented Katy Perry." And to my horror they began the song that Umarekawaru had been working on.

_Yo check it out I've got a plan
>Here's my intention HAHA!
The frat boys in the club are lame

>Let's start an altercation
It's just what I'm used to
>Just want to fuck shit up
I've got my whole damn crew
>Come on what you gonna do?

And what's more the crowd, who had no idea about the plagiarism, was really into it, cheering and dancing in the isles.

_I know it's wrong, but I don't mind

>I'm gonna start shit tonight
I kissed a boy just to start shit

>Bitches loved it.

"Thanks! We are Raven's Cry!"

I looked around, horrified, to see Cat's equally stricken face, and Shukke looking strangely like the cat eating a canary. _She knows something._ I decided, barely paying attention to 14Phantom or what they were playing.

And then Umarekawaru came on stage in the darkness, the sound of them wheeling something on stage following the mass of footsteps. "So uhâ€¦My turn to introduce. We want to dedicate this to the little birdies in our bushes." Harada said from where he sat at his drums. "The reason I am doing this is because I still want to make a difference, if only in one person's life at a time."

Shocked that they were still gonna play the same song I almost didn't hear some kid in the crowd shout "NOW!" And about twenty people aimed flashlights at the stage. There on stage, though, was a big frame in front of the band with a black sheet with the words 'Nice Try Raven's Cry' painted in huge red letters.

It was then that Okita and Heisuke began to pluck an intricate scale on their guitars. As the drummers lightly pounded on their instruments Hajime murmured in a way too sexy voice,

_She said he so sweet
>I wanna lick the wrapper_._

Souji came in with _So I let her lick the wrapper_.

And then as the music came in louder Saito sang out,

_And she~~__,__ (Like a lollipop) __
>_She licked me (Like a lollipop)
>Like a lollipop (Like a lollipop)_
>_Like a lollipop (Like a lollipop). _

_Shorty wanna thug
>(Bottles in the club)
Shorty wanna hump
>(Yah know I like to touch)
Yah lovely lady lumps
>Shorty wanna thug
(Bottles in the club)
>Shorty wanna hump
(Yah know I like to touch)
>Yah lovely lady lumps

Cute lil' mama had a swag like mine
>She even wear her hair
Down her back like mine
>I make her feel right
When it's wrong like lyin'
>Man she ain't never
Had a love like mine
>But Man I ain't never
Seen an ass like hers
>That - in my mouth
Had me loss for words
>Told her to back it up
Like berp berp
>And I made that ass jump
Like jerp jerp
>And that's when she
She licked me
>Like a lollipop
Like a lollipop

This was way different than the song they had practiced, the one that that Raven's Cry stole. It was way better too, as Okita and Heisuke

continued to abuse the high notes of their guitars.

Won't you get on your knees
>Won't you get on your knees

Girls were screaming so loud, glass could break.

_Call me so I can
>Come and do it for you
Call me so I can
>Come and prove it for you
Call me so I can
>Make it juicy for you
Call me so I can
>Get it juicy.

I felt myself blushing as my imagination ran away with itself and knew Cat well enough to know behind whatever cool exterior she was showing, her mind was _gone_.

_Shorty wanna thug
>(Bottles in the club)
Shorty wanna hump
>(Yah know I like to touch)
Yah lovely lady lumps
>Won't you get on your knees

And Hajime held the last you long and high as the instruments finished the song.

"Ohâ€¦_myâ€¦ _God!" The girls behind us were at it again. I turned to face them for the third time in three battles in time to see the girl in the middle of the three faint, her friends fanning her with their hands.

"Remember girl, dude's taken!" The girl on the left yelled over the crowd. "That word written on the board last time meant 'I love you' right?"

"Wake up!" The one on the right contributed. I turned back to Shukke, Cat and Chizuru feeling amused.

Needless to say, Umarekawaru won the challenge round; it took ten minutes to calm the crowd. Because of this though, we had to wait a long time in the bus while the crowds first thinned, and then gave up, waiting on the guys of the winning band to exit the back door. Cat drove home so Souji wouldn't ask her more than once about how she liked the song, a knowing smirk on his face as she got into the driver's seat.

"Souji picked the song," Shinpachi told us on the way home, a glance towards the driver betraying how amused he was.

"Yeah but Saito did the arrangements," Harada added looking slyly at me from the corner of his eye.

Heisuke looked like he was ready to pop from held in laughter from where he sat in the second row as he leaned over the seat to watch everyone. I realized I had a pretty incredulous look on my face and attempted to alter my expression.

"They are lying to you." Saito informed me from the seat in front of me.

"It was Sano and Shinpachi who decided on the song and arrangement.

Don't let 'em fool you." Souji said from the front seat with a laugh.

"Well," Harada began, a glint in his eye, "We figured there's more than one girl out there throwing themselves at Saito because of that voice of his, we are helping him out. I mean, maybe a little competition will inspire you to respond to him Bell-san. Honestly, how many times has he admitted he cares about you?"

"I am not in need of your assistance, Sano." Hajime told him lightly as I gaped in the seat behind him.

"You sure about that?" Shinpachi teased, "Even the girls at Shimabara had a hard time with you, you're so shy."

"Up tight more like." Heisuke threw in playfully.

"Little kids should stay out of grown up conversations," Souji told him. As Heisuke popped the seal on his sword with a snarl, Shukke stood up from the seat across from him and promptly sat on his legs where they stretched out on his seat.

"No fighting on the bus." She intoned seriously. "The Scaredy Neko is driving." To which Cat slammed on the breaks and half rose from her seat behind the wheel. Horns blared on all sides and she sat back down and went back to driving.

Sannan adjusted his glasses and announced, "We should continue this when we get home. I don't want to die in a car crash."

Apparently they are still afraid of the metal lunchbox on wheels.

Songs used in this chapter:

I Kissed A Boy by Cobra Starship (The stolen song)

Lollipop Remix by Framing Hanley (Umarekawaru's song at the battle)

13. Intermission 3: Let It Burn

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 12<p>

~Intermission Three; Let It Burn~

I walked into my bedroom, noting the door was already wide open. The supposition that a Shinsengumi member was in my room proved false though as I stood face to face with an oddly attractive man. His jet black hair had orange streaks and his eyes were so dark a brown they looked like they could match his hair color. His skin was alabaster white and there was something familiar about him. Something in the

chewed and split nails on his fingers and the cross earing in his left ear.

"Scream for me." He whispered hoarsely.

+..+

I woke up with a screaming start causing Hajime to open his eyes quickly and lurch over to my bed.

"Shhh," He soothed, left hand stroking my hair. "You had a nightmare."

"He was in here, he stood right there and told me to scream." I blurted out in a rush.

"Who was?" Hajime asked, confused.

"I-I don't know." I hesitated to describe the man in my dreams, but did in the end. "He was familiar."

"That's the lead singer of Akira 1OH!1, they usually place right behind Raven's Cry. You didn't know?"

"I don't normally pay attention to their sets." I admitted quietly, feeling like an ass. Hajime frowned at the news and wondered aloud at the man being in my dreams if I never watched his band's act. "I don't know, something about him must have stood out I guess."

"Well, worrying about how he got in your dreams isn't going to help you figure out the reason as to why he was there. Think you can get back to sleep?" For all that he seemed to be rushing me back to sleep I could see the concern in Hajime's eyes, in the soft frown on his lips, so I lowered my head to my pillow and fell back to a less fitful slumber. As I drifted off, I could hear Hajime humming the chorus line to 'Comatose'.

When I opened my eyes next, it was to sunshine and a still sleeping purple haired Shinsengumi across from me. Or at least I thought Hajime was asleep but his eyes peeked open as I stared at him revealing that, as always, he was very alert.

"Did you sleep better that time?" He asked needlessly, anything was better than waking up screaming, but I held my tongue and nodded an assent to his obvious question. It struck me that it was nice to have someone concerned about me. Shukke would have nodded and smile if I told her I had a nightmare and Cat would have slapped the back of my head and told me to stop being a wuss. _Good things do happen. Dreams do come true._

That dream, though, that nightmare. When I thought back on it the scary thing was not that a strange man was in my room, after all waking up to Hajime across the way from me the first time had not scared me and he had seemed pretty strange at first. _It's because it wasn't Hajime. _I was relying on him being in my life too much and that was dangerous. _What will I do if he's not around anymore?_

"Would you like to duel with me at the park after practice today?" Hajime asked all of a sudden. "I have a feeling Cat will be

unavailable."

"Oh, is she going on a date?" I couldn't help but sound jealous, and Hajime's face showed that he had caught the tone. I smoothed my discontent over with a smile that had him frowning deeper.

"You don't need to fake smiles around me Ryane." He used my full first name to show how serious he was about the statement. "I would very much prefer if you didn't in any case."

"I didn't want you to think I was mad." I admitted softly, unsure why I was explaining my motives to him in the first place.

"You're not?" He sounded confused.

"Do you want me to be?" I was just messing with him at this point but he looked upset at the possibility as he said, "I guess I'm just old school."

"Yeah," I agreed with a genuine grin, "One hundred and fifty years old school."

"That doesn't bother you does it Ry-chan?"

"No." The simple answer brooked no discussion. It didn't bother me and if I had to say one way or another I would call him a miracle. Damned if I tell him that though.

"You know, what the guys said on the bus after the third battle was true." Saito admitted after a long silence that I was sure would not have ended.

"What? You being shy or uptight?" I asked playfully causing him to give me a bit of a smile.

"Both," He said, "Don't you think?"

"I think you're reserved. You don't open easily and you trust very few. But those you do trust are allowed to see your passionate side, if they know how to look for it." I told him honestly.

"And you have seen this side to me?" He asked dubiously.

"You, uh, you're kidding right?" I questioned, thinking he was joking, but he just shook his head with a serious look on his face. "Well let's seeâ€¦Aside from the whole incident with the tree where I had never seen that look on your face before, or the time you wrote me a song, or even made me breakfast and held me as you confessed your feelings more privately, there is the fact that you kissed me. Am I forgetting anything?"

"I didn't think you would actually list them," he admitted, his face cracking with a smile. "And I am still waiting for you to yell at me for kissing you like that, it was rude and forward andâ€¦"

"And I am waiting for you to do it again!" I interrupted with a blush. "Do I have to give you expressed permission or should I just kiss you instead."

"You have no idea how inappropriate that would be where I come from."

His face became serious, if slightly confused, again.

"We'll start with this then," I told him and leaned in and pecked his cheek, "And we'll go from there." His hand went to his cheek as I grabbed some clothes and headed out the door to the shower. "I'll be down for practice in a few."

I could tell he looked at the digital clock on my computer screen because I heard him rush down the stairs behind where I went into the bathroom.

Practice was as efficient as always even with Okita constantly looking over at Cat. I was convinced he was doing it to make her uncomfortable because she would bounce between me and Shukke like the little yellow duck in a shooting game. He would look at her and _ping_ she would go to Shukke, _ping_ she would come to me. After a while I just plopped her on the couch and put my legs over her lap with a look that commanded her to stay put.

What can I say? I was still mad at her for telling Shukke about me and Saito's kiss. I figured, let her squirm. She either didn't know about her upcoming date, or she didn't want us to know. I was betting the latter.

The two hour practice consisted of one song that they reviewed countless times, no one looked at the bushes so I figured this would be the only song of the week. The song was one of Hijikata's, something he called 'Nightmare' and I could only think how appropriate it was to have had one the night before.

Slowly though the time wound down and practice stopped abruptly with both drummers putting their sticks away and Sannan stepping away from the keyboard he would be playing for the song while cracking his knuckles. Okita came to stand in front of Cat.

"You ready?" He asked teasingly.

"Whatcha doin? O-ki-ta." I asked coyly looking over his shoulder at Shukke who came rushing over with a camera.

"Oh, my baby is all grown up and going on a date with a samurai from the nineteenth century!" She cooed at Cat, grabbing her cheek and pulling playfully.

"Cut it out." Cat snapped, "And _no_ pictures!" But it was too late and Shukke was snapping photo after photo until, enraged, Cat grabbed the digital and slammed it to the ground. Shukke, in reaction, took out her phone and began to take more pictures while I grabbed the SIM card out of the digital for later blackmail.

"Leave while you can. There are still no deaths." I warned Okita who was laughing at Cat trying to jump and reach Shukke's cellphone. It was too high though, Shukke being an amazon.

"You know I heard that from opponents in battles. It never worked for them either." He said between chuckles.

"She'll be too tired to have any fun with you. Where ever you're going," I warned him.

"Hmmm, good point," he admitted, calming his laughter. He snaked an arm around Cat's waist and turned her before hoisting her up over his shoulder. "We'll be back!" He announced as he walked out the front door, Cat pounding his back with her fists and trying to kick him in the face. Shukke kept taking pictures the whole time.

"These are so going on Facebook!" She squealed happily.

"You're not allowed to tell them he's a samurai. Or in the band." I warned her retreating back, causing her to turn and scowl at me. "Just a friendly reminder." And she walked off grumbling something that strangely sounded like, "Whose side are you on?"

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

Souji's incessant smirk continued to tick me off as we walked to a bus stop nearby. He wouldn't let me drive where we were going, so we were taking buses other than the one me and the girls owned. "What!" I couldn't take that expression anymore. Whatever he was thinking it was about me, and I wanted to know.

"You know," He started, practically walking sideways so he could watch my reaction to whatever he was about to say, "If your skin were lighter you would be as red as a tomato."

I just gaped at him before trying to slap him. But as I really got in his face I saw those eyes. The ones he only looked at me with. Beautiful green eyes laced with warmth and with a sad streak of loneliness in the darkness. Without even realizing it I had stopped my hand midair, so I dropped it, having lost the momentum necessary for a good slap.

Then he had to ruin it with a somewhat sarcastic wink as his eyes became cold and distant again; I stomped his foot with my heel. There, now there was pain in his eyes. _Jerk_.

The bus arrived shortly after and began its way downtown. We were the only ones on the smelly thing but that really only meant Souji was more of what passed for forward amongst the samurai. He held my hand and let me rest my head on his shoulder. It was quiet, peaceful. And then we hit downtown Rochester in all its blustery glory.

It was March so of course it was snowing and school had just let out a little while ago so high school kids were all over the place. That was just my luck of course because girls started to pull out their phones and take pictures of Souji or titter about or laugh. I got called a few names as he and I walked side by side, till he reached over and took my hand again. He brought my wrist to his lips and kissed it right there in front of all those girls. And of course those brats went around squealing at how cute he was and giggling and saying 'aww'. Ridiculous.

And of course the trademark smirk. He was lucky I cared so much about him or I would hurt him in front of all these people. Well, then I would get my ass handed to me by a bunch of high school girls and possibly the cops on the corners. Speaking of cops, it was really a good thing my coat concealed my sword, but Souji just walked right past them like it was nothing. They must have thought it was fake

because they didn't stop us.

We stood in front of Liberty Pole for close to ten minutes. I couldn't help but shiver, and had no idea how the green eyed terror could just stand there without a coat. Then I remembered the first time I had watched him in action, how he had fought all that time without a shirt on. How a blizzard had gone through that night. How could I forget? That was the night he had saved my life.

All of a sudden the wind wasn't so fierce and his arms were around my waist so he could hold me close and keep the cold away.

"Souji?" I asked loud enough for him to hear.

"Hmm?" He murmured in my ear.

"When is your birthday?"

"Why do you want to know?" He queried.

"I'm getting you a winter coat when it rolls around. You're making me cold just standing there without one." I pulled away and jabbed him in the chest.

"Then you better keep me warm all winter." He took my hand from his chest and placed it at his neck before pulling me close again. "It's in the summer."

We stayed that way for another five minutes before the bus he wanted came and took us out to the suburbs. He pulled the cord in front of an AMF bowling alley and guided me across the icy parking lot.

"What in the name of all the saints are we doing in a bowling alley?" I knew I sounded off, but really I was stupefied. How could he possibly have heard of bowling?

"It was on the TV." He told me serenely. "You know, that wonderful machine that we didn't have where I come from?"

I huffed at that but then we were next to get shoes and a lane and remarkably, Souji was learning not to talk about the 1800s around strangers. As we stepped up to the counter though, the cashier kept giving him bedroom eyes. Of course Souji saw this and his smirk came full force.

"Hi uh, I'll take a size 11 mens and my girlfriend will take a 7 womens." He smoothly ended her dreaming then and there, leaving me dumbfounded and asking, "How do you know my shoe size?"

As the girl came back with the shoes her eyebrows hit her hairline as he looked over at me and said, nice and loud, "I checked while you were still in bed." _Great now the whole place thinks we are lovers. Not that I wouldn't be willing if things progressed I mean that would be great but I don't think they will and I don't know ifâ€¦Oh he is _such_ a jerk!_

I realized I was still standing at the counter holding up the non-existent line a minute later when Souji cleared his throat loudly, amusement in his eyes. "And where were you just now?" He asked in a sickly sweet voice.

"Imagining myself still in bed and not out with some crazed, ridiculous wanna be rocker with a bad sense of humor." I retorted quickly, not missing a beat.

"Crazy?" He said affecting a twitch. "I was crazy once."

"How many times did you hang out with Stacy?" I asked with a laugh, giving up, I had no response to that.

"Just that one time at the party in December. I thought that loop was funny though." _Oh boy here we go. _"Bugs? I hate bugs! They drive me crazy! Crazy? I was crazy once! They locked me in a room with padded walls. I died there. They buried me with bugs. Bugs? I hate bugs! They drive me crazy! Crazy? I was cra-" This continued till we had grabbed the appropriate weight bowling balls and headed to our lane right in front of the cashier's desk.

Finally I snapped. "If you don't stop so help me I will shove this bowling ball somewhere very unpleasant for you!"

"I don't need Sannan-san here to tell me that that is anatomically impossible. If you want me to borrow your cellphone I can call him for a confirmation on that though." He smiled innocently at me before putting his ball on one of the chairs and moving his hand to his sword. "Wanna go?" He offered still smiling innocently.

"Oh no you don't! There are way too many bystanders!" I almost shouted even though I knew, or at least was eighty-five percent certain, that he was kidding.

"Bet you wouldn't mind that lady at the desk getting in the way though. You should have seen your face when she looked at me like that. I thought you were gonna skewer her." He teased me mercilessly.

"You know what? When I win this game you're not allowed to bring that up ever again!" I told him forcefully.

"Fine but when I win more games than you tonight I get to kiss you in front of her." I didn't know if he was teasing of not, but what the hell, he had never played before it was a no brainer that he would lose. "Deal?" He asked me in all seriousness, and without thinking I threw my hand out in front of me to shake confirming, "Deal."

Damn it! Not only did I lose that first game, but I lost three out of the four we played. I think he gave the last to me because he thought I might kill him otherwise. But now I was riding back downtown next to a very smug young samurai who, no doubt, was thinking about the scorching kiss he gave me in front of a very shocked cashier.

He hadn't even held back as, after he paid for the games and rentals, he grabbed me before I could run, placed his left hand to the side of my face, his right on my hip, leaned down and kissed me. He was even so bold as to drag his teeth gently along my lower lip. It made me feel like I was on fire. And it wasn't a slow building burn. No it felt like he had doused me in gas and his lips were the match.

Shit! I really liked this guy, I'd have to kill Shukke or I would never hear the end of this. And _how_ did he learn to bowl like that?

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

Hajime and I waited fifteen minutes before heading towards the park, giving the other couple plenty of time to get to their bus stop before we left. Shukke took out her phone to snap another thousand or so pictures, but Hajime grabbed it from her hands and threw it to Shinpachi, who promptly ran out the door. Shukke just shrugged her shoulders and walked to the couch. Sitting down she crossed her hands in her lap and stared at us instead blinking intently.

"I'm taking pictures with my mind." She informed us calmly, and that was our cue to leave.

"So you know those classes Cat brought up a while ago, that you two met in?" Hajime asked as we hit the sidewalk, "I think Shukke might have needed them instead."

"How did you know what that was about..?" The query sounded strained even to my own ears. It wasn't that I didn't trust him; I would have liked to have said something though.

"Cat," was his simple, unhelpful answer. He elaborated, "She told me that you two met at a mental health program to get your lives on track. She also says that you're much better now, and that you don't need any of the, and I quote, 'stupid pills' they made you take because, and again I quote, you were 'already right in the head.'"

"It's not something we often talk about." I informed him by way of apology for not saying anything earlier. "I went through a phase where I told everyone I met because it could filter out assholes, but in time I realized most people show their colors soon enough anyway." We had reached the park by now and Hajime turned to face me. I reached for my blade, but his katana suddenly appeared a hair's breadth from my cheek.

He sheathed his sword again and bowed to me. The usual kids were joining us, along with a few of their parents, sick of hearing about the daily event and not knowing if it was safe for their children to watch.

"Parents are here today." Hajime noted calmly.

"Yeah so be doubly certain you don't cut me," I quipped.

"Never." The seriousness in his tone threw me off guard.

I charged at him, blade still in its sheath. As I reached him I danced away from his weapon as it flashed out of its covering, pulling the shorter blade he lent me and holding his sword at bay behind my back, turning and continuing to hold him back at the same time. Time continued swiftly for me as back and forth we parried and slashed. I knew he wasn't going all out on me but it was still fun; this deadly dance where weapons flashed and hearts raced.

He sheathed up again as I ran for him, giving me enough time to slid between his legs in response, but I couldn't get up in time and he was over me, his sword hovering inches above my heart. It was snowing again and the little flakes were clumping in his hair, which he still had tied with a white cord in a low side tail. As the snow fell parents began to breathe again and applauded happily along with their children.

All of them were unaware of how real it was for Saito to be fighting with his sword. That it had been his only way to live, his means of survival.

Even I didn't understand, though I tried very hard, what it must be like to be here for him. Was my miracle his own version of Hell? It's something I didn't want to ask, but at the same time yearned to know.

Do you miss it? I had asked him that the night they came forward in time, to this world without swords. _I wonder if his response would be the same now. Could I understand it at all? Even a little? _ I didn't think so. Parents and children slowly walked away, the children disappointed thinking we were done because I just lay there, his sword angled to pierce my heart.

"Something is on your mind." He was too clever, too observant. I didn't want to answer the question he didn't ask. I wanted to let this fire of wanting to know but not being able to ask burn longer. But then those azure eyes caught mine and I felt that I had to ask. There was darkness in those icy blues; darkness I wanted to leave.

So taking a deep breath I grabbed the hand offered me and pulled Hajime into the snow instead of getting up. "I was thinking about how I couldn't possibly understand what it's like." I explained slowly, still holding his hand. "What you guys have gone through. This world is nothing like what you had known. It's nothing like what you are used to. I don't know what to do for you, I can't send you back or anything, I can't even take your memories. What am I supposed to do to help?"

"Just hold my hand. Just like this." I could feel his eyes on me, but I couldn't look over, I was afraid I would cry at my own helplessness. "I died back there. There is nothing in the past for me anymore. So don't think about sending me back. I build my life on who I was, so don't take my memories from me. Just hold my hand, and build new memories with me. The way of the warriorâ€¦the time of the sword, these things are over. But we found something else we like doing. And we don't take lives with it." Saito sat up, and then stood up and reached a hand for me again.

This time I allowed him to pull me up to stand beside him.

We arrived back at home hours later after having started a few more sword fights and just walking side by side along the frozen Genesee River. The sun had set and the moon was well on its way into the sky when we set foot into the house, which was incidentally just in time to listen to Souji go over how the cashier at a bowling alley had been making visual advances at him while Cat fumed on the couch.

"I got her to kiss me though." He finished with a flourish.

"Who, the cashier? And Cat didn't kill you?" I asked in the door way.

"No, not the cashier," Okita frowned at me. "Cat."

"Wasn't she, likeâ€¦ terrified of you?" I teased easily, glancing out of the corner of my eye at the ticking time bomb that was my friend.

_3,2,1_ "Not nearly as scared as he's gonna be of me if he doesn't _Shut Up_." Cat growled.

"Now, now, Catharineâ€¦Dogs growl, Cats hiss." Souji joked.

We had to take her sword away for the evening.

* * *

><p>So, for the record I know _**historically**_** Saito wasn't dead at the time i had them come forward, but work with me people.**

14. Akira 1Oh 1: Nightmare

A/N:

Just taking a moment to thank the person the newest band was named for. Akira-chan 101, in addition to writing nice reviews to this story also has sent some very kind PMs to me, one of which was very timely in reminding me that people liked this work so I had to pick up the writing again when i was slacking. In thanks to her Akira 1OH!1 was born. Also for you Kazama fan's *cough* 14Phantom *cough* a little surprise.

**Also today I am using a song suggested by **Sakura Otome...hope you like it.

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 13<p>

~Akira 1Oh!1; Nightmare~

Unknown Point of View:

I was sick of waiting. A decade was more than enough time to ponder the meanings and reasonings as to why I desired what I wanted. I was sure if that female brat could use that power, I could to. I just had to find out where she had taken them. Hell I would even bring a gift. It was time to call for the strong hand and the gun man. The former would come out of a sense of obligation to me. The latter, because it was fun.

The reasons behind my actions had somehow become about _him,_ rather

than that brat he protected, which was just as well. _It_ would bring us to where the heart wanted to go. So, powerâ€¦bring me to the Oni of the Pale Sakura Blossom.

Ryane's Point of View:

Shukke was up to something. She kept glancing from me to Hajime with that same stupid smile on her face. The smile that had not left her lips since she woke up this morning. Asking her would not avail much, so I would just have to wait it out. She would get bored and tell me before too long.

Tonight was battle night, the fourth out of what would be ten, and the band was practicing Hijikata's song when Shukke's phone went off causing her to head to the kitchen. I was getting up to follow but Hajime stopped me by asking some bullshit question about the vocal arrangements. That's when I knew; they were all up to something.

A few moments later Shukke came back to the living room and plopped down on the couch, nothing noticeably different in her appearance or attitude except that she stared straight at Shinpachi. In response he played a drum solo before calming down and going through the planned beats for the song again.

That's it I was going to kill her and use the power of Divination to get the answers from her intestines! I wanted to know what they were up to! It never occurred to me to ask Hajime. He was the weak link in the information chain when it came to me, so I would probably have gotten my answers, but instead practice continued as usual.

_Ooooooh
>It's your fucking nightmare.

The song concluded a final time and Shukke immediately jumped up and demanded everyone get to the bus. Thusly herded she drove us to the mall. "I have decided!" She proclaimed. "We are going to the club after next week's battle. You two," and here she turned her nose up at me and Cat, "Need party clothes."

"Really Shukke?" Cat whined.

"I thought they were supposed to be keeping a low profile." I pointed out, gesturing to the band where they stood behind me.

"If you just do what she says I will tell you how Souji knew how to bowl," Hajime offered in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Hey!" Okita sparked up, "That was supposed to be our secret, you swore."

Cat and I glanced at each other before nodding. "Deal!" She agreed happily.

"She's gonna kill you~" Heisuke laughed from beside Chizuru.

"How do _you_ know?" Okita sneered.

"I happened to pass by while heading to the bathroom that night." He chortled. "You guys were going on about aim practice in Ryane's

room."

"Waitâ€¦ Aim practice?" I asked confused.

"That's what she said." Heisuke crowed; laughing as he danced away from Hajime's annoyed swipe.

"Children have such impressionable minds." Okita retorted for the vocalist.

We were all still in the food court when the air contracted and my ears popped. In a sense of DÃ©jÃ vu I saw the air crackling by the wall of the Burger King. I didn't realize I was screaming until I felt a warm hand muffling the sounds of terror as they left my mouth.

The eyes of cold blooded killers looked out of my friends faces as they looked on the four figures, one with his sword at the throat of a hidden fifth who seemed to be unconscious. The security guard looked freaked out, as did the patrons of the mall. No one moved or made a sound.

A few minutes went by before I heard a very blonde very disdainful man drawl, "I see, so that's how it goes."

"Kazama!" Hijikata snarled, moving to step in front of Chizuru. The movement was greeted by a smirk on Kazama's face and a light guffaw from the purple haired man to his right.

"Chizuru?" The littlest of the new arrivals quested forth a huge grin on his face. "Chizuru!"

"That's far enough Kaoru." Kazama announced; his sword moving from the unconscious man slumped on the floor behind the largest man with them to block Chizuru's twin's path. "Remember, I brought you back, you listen to me!" To which Kaoru nodded and took three steps back to where he originally stood.

"Hakuouki." Kazama acknowledged his adversary for the first time. "I believe I have something that belongs to you. You and I will fashion for ourselves a modern duel. I will find something you and your cohorts excel at and steal it from you. In the meantime, I return this to you. Amagiri to one side. Shiranui" He turned to address the man with long purple hair, "get ready to leave."

And Amagiri moved to reveal the unconscious man in the process of running from the mall. Shiranui stopped in front of the Shinsengumi, shocked, though.

"You brought them _all_ back?" He asked Chizuru as he stared at the risen samurai. "Haradaâ€¦" His eyes were drinking in the visage of his one-time ally like the man would disappear from the face of the earth again anytime.

"Still friends?" Harada asked with a smile.

The purple haired Oni just looked behind him to where Kazama appeared and replied, "I never said we were in the first place." And booked it towards the door. While this went on Souji simply fell to his knees in thanks, leaving a very confused Cat staring at the gruff man

slumped at the wall at Burger King.

Following her gaze I saw the reason behind Okita's thanks. Slumped there, oblivious to his new life, the gift of umarekawaru, sat Isami Kondou.

The other captains of the Shinsengumi all rushed to their commander while Souji continued to stare at the ground, stunned. Reaching him they all helped Shinpachi load the man onto his back and headed for the door. We got to the bus before the mall patrons even began to stir. "Shukke, drive." I commanded.

"But Iâ€¦" She tried to argue, curiosity alight in her eyes.

"Shukke, please!" I begged.

"Fine," she agreed glumly.

"You can ask questions later," I promised.

While we had argued the driving detail the Shinsengumi had lowered Kondou down onto the bus floor with Chizuru at his head. She placed her hand palm up on his forehead before delicately slicing into her other palm and holding the cut hand over Kondou-san's mouth which was slightly agape. With the little bit of blood he received the commander's eyes fluttered open and he took in his surroundings with confusion written on his face.

"Naniâ€¦" He began, only to have Hijikata cut him off.

"In English, Commander. There are some people here who do not understand Japanese."

"Toshi?" The newly revived man looked around the group of people surrounding him in a daze. "What happened? Where am I? What is this language I am speaking? How do I know it? Am I dead? I remember a blade chopping my head off. Is this paradise?" With the last question Shukke barked a laugh from the driver's seat.

"Paradise, he says." Looking into the mirror above her head Shukke took on the task of explaining. "You died, but those Oniâ€¦Kazama and his gang brought you back to life and forward around one hundred fifty years to America. It's the year 2013. As for the language, whatever those Oni did, and whatever Chizuru did to bring back the Shinsengumi before you, it re-hardwires your mind. Gives you information you would have had if you lived here. Like the language, which is English. Right now you are in a bus owned by myself and the other two unknown faces in here. My name is Shukke. Or rather, that's what you're going to call me." Turning her attention back to the road, we felt the bus swerve to the left suddenly and Shukke lay on the horn, causing the samurai to exclaim in surprise and Chizuru to scream.

"Relax," I cautioned, "It was bound to happen eventually. Shukke is a lunatic when it comes to driving. It's like her personality flails around and becomes something else."

"Basically just sit down and buckle up." Cat added for me.

"She wasn't like this before," Sannan pointed out.

"She's used to you now." I explained.

"Great," was the general, if slightly sarcastic consensus.

We made it home without too much incident, but the ride was quiet and question-less as the Shinsengumi tried to maintain composure with Shukke being a maniac behind the wheel. I think she just took to swerving to hear Chizuru scream though, because she leaned heavy on the wheel way more than usual and the young Oni girl would shriek each time.

When she parked in the lawn, Heisuke was the first off as he kneeled in the yard and kissed the ground. "That was the worst!" He whined. "Thank everything bright and beautiful I am still alive!" Shukke just chuckled as she got off last before walking to the front door and unlocking it.

"We have an hour before we have to load everything and head out, so let's figure out where Kondou-san is gonna stay. There is not much space in the living room for another, unless one of you wants to bed elsewhere." She said calmly, ignoring the fact that the samurai were hedging away from her nervously.

Okita looked over at Cat slyly before stating, "I can find a different room to sleep in. On the floor of course." Cat rolled her eyes but didn't complain.

"Wait," Kondou began, confused, "Load everything?"

"The instruments and everything." Shukke said without explaining much. "You will see."

The rest of the time before load up was spent with the band and Chizuru welcoming Kondou and acquainting him with the house. While he wasn't as surprised as Sannan about the TV or as excited about Hijikata about the books that mostly I owned, he did seem very intrigued by my computer, which he saw as we passed my open door. The background I was currently using was a switching affair of pictures from the anime that I had seen about the Shinsengumi. As we passed it was changing from a picture of Hajime in a bamboo forest, bloody and holding his sword, to a group photo. His face went dark as moments later it switched to a picture of Kazama, causing him to storm in much to my displeasure.

"Hey!" I protested.

"What is that? Why is _he_ on there?" Kondou raged at me.

"Because I like the picture, shouldn't you be at least a little grateful to him? He brought you back to your friends, regardless of ulterior motive that deserves some amount of thanks." The man bristled as the Shinsengumi piled in.

The picture switched to one of Kondou and Souji back to back, Kondou with a paternal grin on his face while Souji had his typical sneer. "I don't approve," I told him as he stared in wonder at it, "Of what Kazama did to Chizuru or to any of you. I do find him to be a complex and interesting character though, driven by his honor and the code he

lives by. He was a major part of the show, and was, in fact, a major part of your lives. Don't be mad at me for celebrating that."

"This show," Kondou asked, "Can I watch it?"

"I think it might just hurt to remember your old life," I said seriously. "But I can show you them if you like."

"Is it on YouTube?" Souji asked all of a sudden.

"How do you know about YouTube?" Cat wanted to know, "you have never been on Ryane's computer."

"That's how he knew how to bowl," Hajime explained in a quiet voice, "He snuck on her computer and looked it up while she was sleeping."

My vision went black. "He did _what_? When?"

"That night you had a nightmare," Hajime said, creeping back a step at a time before I could explode.

"You _knew!?_" I was beyond mad.

"Yeah that's why he had you go right back to sleep instead of talking about it, I was sitting right there the whole time." Okita enlightened with a laugh.

"She's gonna kill you~" Heisuke sang out.

My hand went to my sword and I was only stopped by Kondou-san's whistle of admiration. "What!" I snapped at him.

"You got Hajime to give you one of his prized swordsâ€¦Impressive." He replied.

"It wasn't contrived." I assured him a bit tartly, still angry.

"Even more impressive then." Kondou raised his hands in a portrayal of innocence. "Would you rather not I used your computer to watch that show Miss?" He sounded reluctant to offer the withdrawal and I could tell he really did want to know what the show could possibly tell him, so I conceded defeat.

"You can use it, but only because you asked. I am madder that these fools just used it, and then hid it because they knew I would be angry. If they had just told me then I would have been fine."

"Sorry Ry-chan," Hajime was rubbing his neck with one hand and looking at the floor. He seemed honestly distressed by my being angry so I relented and assured him that it was okay.

"Just don't do it againâ€¦at least don't try to hide it."

"Time's a tickingâ€¦" Shukke called from near the stairs and looking at the clock on my wall we all piled out to load the weapons the Shinsengumi used as Umarekawaru.

Luckily we got to the venue early again so we could shove Kondou into

a seat next to Chizuru without any fuss. The ten minutes between our arrival and the beginning of the battles was spent in silence, though Cat kept peering at the Commander of the Shinsengumi like she had questions, probably about Okita, that she kept to herself.

The announcers came on amidst cheers and applause to call forth Falling Wisteria, and the show began. Half way through the show I forced myself to pay attention as Akira 1Oh!1 was announced.

There stood the man from my nightmare his cross earring slightly crooked and his bitten nails sporting a new coat of black polish. "Hey we are Akira Oneâ€¦"

He paused holding the mic to the crowd who yelled "Oh!"

"One." He picked up the flow seamlessly, "And this is our newest song, Relapse Collapse." Their pianist introduced the song with a lovely melody before the vocalist began, their disc jockey starting up around the same time,

_Bring back hollow reputations.
>It's giving me what I desire.
And I desire to find the words you need to hear._

The band came in full as the vocalist started screaming the words

_Kill. Kill. Kill. Your demons.
>Face. Face. Face. Your fears.
Fight. Fight. With no discretion.

>Die. Die. Die. Alone.
>Again he was singing to the music his band made
_I am the messenger; I am the one you trust with your last breath.
>And you're missing the point.
You're missing the point of these words.
>You've caused the blood that's on your hands.

It was beautiful. The bassist would take over the screaming parts when they coincided with the parts that the vocalist needed to sing creating a melody like no other, and I had to wonder why Raven's Cry was ahead of these guys. Talent-wise they so had them. Akira 1Oh!1 was on par with 14Phantom. The music stopped until Raven's Cry was announced and when they came on the crowd was going nuts.

Raven's Cry played their usual upbeat electro-pop type of song with the vocalist show boating the whole time. If they hadn't acted out against me and Cat I probably would have liked them but because they had I kept noticing flaws. A missed note here, a crack of the vocals there. They finished with a flourish and 14Phantom came on while I looked to Kondou who was excited and clapping happily after each performance. _At least he is enjoying himself._

14Phantom played a ballad this week. Something sweet and kind of sad that would have sounded great on the radio. I looked over my shoulder and saw lighters flickering on around the room. They finished abruptly and bowed before walking offstage, the vocalist's orange hair sporting what looked like plastic carrots. As usual the lights were turned off and the crowd, knowing who was coming next, cheered louder than ever.

Hijikata MC'd this week. "Hey we are Umarekawaru. This week you'll be hearing _my_ song, Nightmare. That being said, the reason I do this is to stay by my _nakamas' _sides. My friends, my comrades, my band. This is Nightmare."

Sannan began on the keyboard, playing a haunting melody and then came the rest of the band in a creepy sort of song.

_(NIGHTMARE!) _Hijikata screamed._
>Hajime entered his voice rough and uneven.
>Now your nightmare comes to life.

Dragged you down below
>Down to the devils show
>To be his guest forever
>(Peace of mind is less than never)

Hate to twist your mind
>But God ain't on your side
>An old acquaintance severed
>(Burn the world your last endeavor)

Flesh is burning
>You can smell it in the air
>Cause men like you have such an easy soul to steal (steal)

So stand in line while they ink numbers in your head
>You're now a slave until the end of time here

(Nothing stops the madness turning, haunting, yearning pull the trigger)

You should have known
>The price of evil
>And it hurts to know that you belong here
>Yeah
>Ooooooh
>It's your fucking nightmare
>(While your nightmare comes to life)

Can't wake up in sweat
>Cause it ain't over yet
>Still dancing with your demons
>(Victim of your own creation)

Beyond the will to fight
>Where all that's wrong is right
>Where hate don't need a reason
>(Loathing self-assassination)

You've been lied to
>Just to rape you of your sight
>And now they have the nerve to tell you how to feel (feel)

So sedated as they medicate your brain
>And while you slowly go insane they tell ya
>("Given with the best intentions, help you with your complications")

There was some heavy instrumentals before

Souji let out some maniacal laughter that the crowd shivered to before he started in on the bridge with Hijikata._
>Fight (Fight!). not to fail (fail!)
Not to fall (fall!)
>Or you'll end up like the others

Die (Die!), die again (die!)
>Drenched in sin (sin!)
>With no respect for another
>(OH!)

Down(Down!), feel the fire(fire!)
>Feel the hate(hate!)
>Your pain is what we desire

Lost (Lost!), hit the wall (wall!)
>Watch you crawl (crawl!)
>Such a replaceable liar

And then Hajime was picking the vocals up again._
>And I know you hear their voices
(Calling from above)
>And I know they may seem real
(These signals of love)
>But our life's made up of choices
(Some without appeal)
>They took for granted your soul
And it's ours now to steal_

(As your nightmare comes to life)

_Oooooh
>It's your fucking nightmare.

The venue's audience was so load I couldn't think, I just stood on my feet and cheered wildly. Over the noise I heard the same three girls at it again.

"Oh that voice." The middle one moaned.

"I'll take the one that was screamingâ€¦" The girl to the left offered with a smile.

"Dibs on the other one then." The one on the right asserted. I really wanted to point out that they had just picked the three guys who were taken in the band, but I held my peace for now. To be honest it was amusing, and I just had to keep telling myself that.

We listened to the announcements for rankings, and I was pleased that Akira 1Oh!1 beat out Raven's Cry this week. Our boys won again with 14Phantom pulling in second again. Steve's band ranked up one spot finally too.

"Thank you," Hijikata said on a microphone, once more outside on the roof. "See you soon." And he turned off the mic as fans of all age race and gender ran for the door to try and see the members of Umarekawaru. Cat, Kondou, Shukke, Chizuru and I waded through the crowd to the bus which we drove to the same pick up spot as last time.

We got home at 11:30 and I was heading to bed when I heard Shukke tell Hajime, "Remember Saito, 8:00 tomorrow night," before he headed

to my room with me, Kondou looking on confused.

* * *

><p>S**ongs used in this Chapter:**

Nightmare by Avenge Sevenfold (Umarekawaru's song: Recommended by Sakura Otome {I tried to get Hijikata to sing as much as possible without having Saito just sit there.})

Relapse Collapse by In Fear And Faith (Akira 1Oh!1's song)

15. Intermission 4: Turn It Up

A/N:

Sorry its so short, I plan to update sooner than usual because i will be out of town for two weeks soon so i will be late updating the chapter after the next one.

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 14<p>

~Intermission 4; Turn It Up~

I still hadn't figured out what the band was up to, but it slipped my mind for a few hours when Saito found the folder with poems and lyrics I had worked on when I was younger. I mean, didn't everyone have a poet phase? Anyway, he set me to writing this week's lyrics, much to my mortification. So without thinking too hard on it I set to work.

He had seemed to spend more time reading the poems with darker themes so I decided on using one not so bright, but not too morbid. As I worked and reworked the song it became lighter anyway. I took it to Hajime as soon as I was finished and he mumbled the lyrics under his breath trying to find a melody.

"Look how you've grown, it's etched in skin and bone
>Dressed in make-up and bleached out in the roses
That's hollow and tasteless where spirits make love" He paused.

"What are these upward arrows you have here?" He asked, pointing to one such marking on the page.

"That's for a higher voice to either sing or sing with you depending on the case." I explained without glancing over at him where he sat on my floor in his usual spot.

"Do a quick run through with me, and we can force Heisuke to do it when I see what you mean." I could only imagine the younger samurai's face when he was told he would be singing the girls part so I lowered myself to the floor and sat straight back listening to Hajime hum the melody he would be using.

By the time we had finished the song Hajime's eyebrows were raised in a small display of surprise. "Why don't you sing it?" He offered.

"Oh, no. Too many people." I blanched as the thought of so many people listening to me washed over me and left me waterlogged. "Make Heisuke do it. That should be more fun."

Eyebrows still against his hairline Hajime nodded in understanding. "If that's how you prefer it. In which case we should find Heisuke. You can sing the parts to him and he'll do what he can to copy the pitch." And so we went to hunt down the youngest member of the Shinsengumi.

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

It was annoying, like a thorn in my side that spit something I was allergic to into my blood. An itchy sort of wound. The punk hadn't spoken more than three words to me since that new guy got here, and it was starting to wear on me. He told me Kondou would approve of me, or at least that he would like me. So why was he ignoring me and skirting around me?

I had half a mind to just ask him but every time I got close to him it was always either at a good time for him to be involved in something else or as I was falling asleep. He was good on his word to sleep on my floor, but I was beginning to think it was just because he wanted to ensure a place for his idol/father figure to sleep in the living room.

I could hear the youngest one yelp in surprise like someone pulled his ponytail so I went to go investigate. I wasn't going to miss out on a chance at some humor considering how pissed my thoughts were making me. He looked as pissed as I felt when I saw him sandwiched between Souji and Saito as they held him in place in front of Ryane.

"Don't want to." He was complaining. That's when Heisuke saw me. He looked from Souji to me and back before shouting out, "Hey Cat!" The minx. Souji, startled, loosened his grip on the boy's left arm making it easy for Heisuke to slip out of his hold and take a swing at Saito. Saito, of course, being Saito ducked to the right and back, also relaxing his grip of their captive so that the boy whipped around, his long hair hitting Ryane in the face as he booked it away from the trio.

"Oops," I offered as Ryane turned to look at me exasperatedly. She opened her mouth to reprimand me for what happened, but I beat her to it. "If that jerk wanna be wasn't dodging me like some kind of disease I don't think the reaction would be the same. And if he weren't reacting like that your captive would not now be a fugitive. Whatever you were trying to make him do didn't look like it was gonna happen anyway though."

"Then I guess you just volunteered," Souji sneered, annoyed probably at being called a wanna be again.

"To do what exactly?" I asked with an almost condescending

calm.

"Sing the female part to Ryane's song." Hajime explained.

"Get Ryane to do it." I told him bluntly, "It's her song, she sings it, because I sure as hell can't. My voice is lower than what's required I am sure."

Souji smirked at this, full of arrogance, and I made to punch him. As my hand raised I saw Kondou watching from behind his pupil so I slowed my fist a bit, looking right at the man those other Oni resurrected. Souji caught my fist, as I anticipated, and without realizing Kondou was there he carefully opened my fist with his calloused fingers and traced a curling line along my palm.

"Do you miss me?" He asked, cocky but serious.

"I don't see why I have to, your still right here."

"I am not good at dividing loyalties." He admitted, like it was just me and him in the room, though admittedly, Ryane and Saito had edged out of the room discreetly.

"You said he would like me." I reminded him softly. "You don't have to 'divide loyalties' anyway. I know how important he is to you. I know how much you missed him. I know how sad you were that he wasn't here, that he had been left behind. I was the one you talked to about it, remember? I am not going to make any demands on you that I haven't already."

"What demands would those be?" He chuckled as he continued to trace lines along my palm and wrist.

"Exactly." I asserted, my gaze looking on his green eyes. "None, right?"

"I do think he will like you, Cat." Souji told me softly, a small smile on his face. "Have you been watching that show?"

"No, I am still waiting for you to just tell me." I said with a laugh.

"Then let me tell you a bit about how me and Kondou-san met, and how he taught me everything I know about the sword, and many of the things I know about life." And he turned me and began to walk me back upstairs to the room we now shared but not before I gave Kondou one last glance and saw his smile.

I couldn't help but laugh as Souji recounted his many tales of the eighteenth century and his life before umarekawaru. "So you named the cat after Hijikata?" I asked an incredulous look on my face.

"Yeah, the little rascal. The cat I mean." He chuckled. "You know," he told me suddenly, "I think I can understand the feelings Hajime had when he wrote Comatose. Remember that."

"Um, okâ€¦" I wasn't sure why he brought it up, or the none to subtle command to remember his feelings, but I guessed I would in time.

"Oooh, eight o'clock is right around the corner. Do you have a radio?" Again with the sudden questions. Confused I pointed to the small alarm clock I had next to my bed. He turned it on and turned the station to 106.7 where an annoyingly chipper DJ spoke at a soothing thousand decibels. A part of me realized it was playing through out the house, most immediately from Ryane's room off her IPod dock.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

They were up to something, I had known that all morning, all day. But that feeling became more pronounced as I heard the same way too happy DJ commenting from Cat's room as Hajime had just turned on. The same station was blasting down in the kitchen too.

"_And now a treat for you guys listening wherever you are. In the city of Rochester a Battle of the Bands called the Ten Ugly Battles is going on and one of those bands is kicking ass! They won three out of the four battles and caught the eye of a local DJ there who sent us this clip he wrangled off an audience member. Apparently these guys, who call themselves Umarekawaru, play in pitch blackness to hide their appearance. They want their music judged, not the way they look. These mystery members have caught the heart of Rochester, giving individual reasons for their being in a band, so this is the clip we got from the audience member. Give it a listen on this nationwide countdown. _

my reason for doing this is because killing people is illegal. And she wouldn't talk to me if I scared her againâ€¦" Comatose came through loud and clear through out the house through multiple speakers, Hajime smiling beside me as I sat heavily on the bed in shock.

As the song he had written for me played on national radio he sang the words to me, my head reeling at how surreal it seemed.

_Oh
>The way you make me feel
Wakin' up to you never felt so real_

The applause was cut short by the DJ off the recording that I sinkingly supposed Shukke had recorded, and that annoyingly chipper voice dominated the radio again. "_Lets get some calls going, geeze the board just lit up. Hi, you're on the air!_

'_Oh my god, that was awesome, LOVED IT.'_

'_They need to get signed pronto, screw the battles these guys need to be center stage.'_

'_Even if they looked tragically ugly those guys are worth a million.'_

'_I hope there is a girl in that group, man so cool.'_

'_Man who bagged these guys to make them write a song like that? Lucky girl.'_

'_That _voice_.'_

'_Wow, I am a huge fan now! When can we expect an album? Umarekawaru for life!'_

And then the DJ was back, again, "_Such good reviews, not a single cynic as far as we can find, some one snatch these guys up. Looking forward to it." _And Hajime reached up and turned the radio off.

"You guys plannedâ€¦and then Shukkeâ€¦sheâ€¦did Chizuruâ€¦.. did Cat? You.." I was sputtering confused as I tried to stand and pace, thinking. "Signedâ€¦you're notâ€¦are you?"

Sighing Hajime sat me back on my bed, and for the first time sat down on it with me. Without quite answering me he stroked the side of my face with his left hand. "All the loves songs I writeâ€¦They will always be for you. Will you listen to them?"

"Yeah," I answered immediately. "Always."

"Promise?" He teased.

"I do."

Hajime nodded before kicking off his boots and curling up under my blankets alongside the wall my bed was next to. I gave him a weird look, which he returned asking, "What you don't trust me?"

Lying down against him, it was the first night in a long time that I slept so early, or so well.

* * *

><p>Songs used this chapter:

Pretty People Never Lie, Vampires Never Really Die by I Am Ghost (The poem Ryane wrote for next chapter's performance)

16. Pretty People: Out Of The Crowd

A/N:

So plans changed, I am not gonna be out of town, so same release time frames after this. It was short last time though so here!

For the song this week its **_Italics _for Saito _Bold Italics** _For Ryane, _Underlined_ Italic Is both Ryane and Saito and (_Parenthesis) _is Hijikata screaming away.

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 15<p>

~Pretty People; Out Of The Crowd~

The days went on as usual for the rest of the week. Practice would start at two. I was still helping Heisuke, who the band had managed to cow into the role of the female part, with his tone and pitch and the rest of the guys were learning the tabs Saito had written for the song. He had left it to me to name the piece which I was not familiar with doing so I figured I would botch it up as much as possible and give it an eccentric name to fit the style.

Cat and I would practice our swordsmanship afterwards in the park; Raven's Cry's fan base had been leaving us alone for the most part this week so Okita and Hajime tended to give us space. She and I had been a bit prickly about being left out of the loop about the radio broadcast and I, for one, felt that something was still up with the guys. Every time we were all in a room together the separate members of the band would look to Okita and Hajime disapprovingly and much to my confusion the two would look away in embarrassment. Stubborn about something, though I couldn't guess what.

The nights were not usual. Saito had been cuddling with me every night of the week. It was a pleasant change even though he hadn't taken me on a date yet. I felt a little easy at the lack of that event but we had time. It's not like he was doing anything more than holding me, so I let it slide. And so, as the lights flickered off in the living room downstairs, Hajime shut my door behind himself and slid into my bed where I already was.

Using his arm as a pillow, I resettled, allowing him space on the small mattress. Turning to him I asked, "So what happened to not being forward?" All the while tightening my grip on his shoulder so he knew I wasn't complaining. When he didn't respond I snuggled closer to him with a sigh. "Why won't you tell me what's going on? I know something is, and your lack of faith in my discretion is annoying."

"There are some things I just can't tell you, not yet. But I will when I am able, in a way that I am able. When I figure out what way that is. Your faith in me is not perfect either." It was a gentle reprimand and at first I had the strong urge to kick him off the bed, but mastering that I was left confused.

Grumblingly I acknowledged his point, "Something tells me I don't even want to know anyway." And he left it at that, opting instead to hum a song in my ear. "What song is that?"

"It's something that plays in my head when I am with you. It doesn't have words yet or I would sing it to you instead." He answered quietly, and a glance up at his mouth proved a small smile.

"It's beautiful." I told him in a breathy whisper.

"That's because it is born of the feelings you create in me, which are also beautiful." The smile widened. "One day I will write words to the melody." He paused. "Kondou-san tells me there are girls who sit behind you at the Battles that claim dibs on me, Hijikata, and Souji."

"Kondou-san needs to keep his mouth shut." I growled.

"You didn't refute these claims, as was your right." He was teasing I

knew but I was still getting pissed off.

"They can think what they like about you; I know I have your heart." The confidence in my voice at that moment was a rare thing, even for something so blatantly obvious.

"Just remember that." All of a sudden Hajime was dead serious, his lips straight and his eyes half lidded in a concentrated stare. I nodded. Then I yawned, which caused him to yawn. "Let's get some sleep," he suggested.

And though it was a peaceful rest I had weird dreams of being alone while surrounded by people.

That morning I couldn't think clearly worth anything because of the dream of being alone. I just lay in bed, Hajime's arms wrapped around me contently. Sometime past noon Cat and Souji walked by, opening the bedroom door and staring in. Cat's eyes were wide and Souji snickered. Neither said anything though, and in the end they walked by with the door still wide open.

Shukke came in at two o'clock and pulled Saito out of bed, a murderous look on her face. I wasn't far behind so I managed to hear her snarl the words 'worthless coward' at him. It didn't make sense to me though, so I let it filter out of my distracted mind.

It was a miracle that Heisuke managed a creditable performance by the end of practice, since they would be on stage that night, even though he was still grousing about having to sing the female part. As Cat and I walked to the front door, scarves in hands he was glaring mutinously at Hajime who glanced at me and went on his way out of the living room, ignoring the young samurai following him.

I shrugged and walked out the door behind my sparring buddy without thinking much of it, still slightly distracted by the dream of standing alone in a crowd. A crowd that was full of the Shinsengumi's faces. Shukke's face was in the crowd too, but Cat's was not. I figured it was a manifestation of my worries about another secret held by the Shinsengumi and my tallest roommate and that it wasn't something I _should_ be too worried about. After all Hajime had said he would tell me when he could. But the creepy loneliness of my dream kept creeping back into my head and I couldn't think past it.

Cat, being Cat, stopped halfway across a deserted street and turned to me. "Girl, if you don't spit out what the hell is going on in that little mind of yours I might be tempted to push you into the next passing car."

Translation: Ryane, I am worried about you, what's wrong?

"Just a dream I had last night. It's got me thinking." I explained vaguely.

"Well you seem to have been thinking about it all day, if that constant constipated look on your face is any indication." She snarked.

Translation: What was it about?

"It was just creepy, I was wandering around the park and all around

me were multiples of the guys, Chizuru and Shukke. But I had this feeling of being so alone, they didn't look at me and they didn't talk to me, in fact it was completely silent. Then one by one the guys and Chizuru disappeared, leaving behind a hundred Shukkes." This time I was more precise in what the dream was about, if one person was a safe bet on telling something weird to it was Cat. Sure she might smack me but she would be concerned if she needed to be.

"Well push it out of your mind, we are here and these kids want a show." But Cat was superstitious about dreams, she even had a book about what different aspects of dreams meant and I know that for a while she had a dream journal. From the looks of it she would be just as preoccupied as me with this new information.

We dueled for an hour, neither of us doing anything really impressive, and Cat actually cut me in her distraction. Well it was more of a graze, but still. When we got home it was barely visible.

Cat and I had just ambled about the park until an hour before the battle so we got home just in time to get ready and help load the bus.

It was weird that for the first time since the battles began, the members of Umarekawaru were dressed like rock stars. The each wore black Tripp pants, black sneakers and the Shinsengumi haori. Note the lack of shirt? Yeah so would everyone else.

Again the non-band members were separated from the men who played, and we, as one, sat in the front row in our usual seats. The girls behind us sat down and began to gossip, before the show this time.

"Rumor on the J-born website says they are gonna perform with the lights on this week." The middle one was saying.

"Oh, really? We finally get to see the guys of J-born?" That was the one on the left.

The one on the right chimed in, "I hear there are seven guys in J-born, but the debate still rages on as to if they are hot or ugly."

"I still say ugly." One said.

"I still say hot." The other debated.

"I still don't care." The middle one declared. "The lead singer of J-born is way too good of a vocalist for it to matter."

I couldn't help it, and I found it odd that my first time addressing these girls it would be out of curiosity rather than anger or disgust. "Excuse me?" I began tentatively.

"Yeah?" The blond in the middle asked, confused but curious at the interruption.

"You keep calling Umarekawaru J-born, right?" She nodded, "When did that start, or is it just you three who call them that?"

"Oh, there is a whole fan base who call them J-born. Umarekawaru," And she stumbled over the word, "Is too hard to say and the definition of the word is too long. So instead of calling them, Japanese for to be reborn, we call them J-born."

"You said something about a forum?" I asked politely, intrigued by this nickname.

"Yeah, just Google J-born when ya' get home." The girl on the left offered happily.

"It will be the third option!" The one on the right supplied. I only had time to nod my thanks as the announcers began the event. A band that I had not paid much attention to started off followed by Falling Wisteria, all the band members sneering and covered in fake blood. At least I was pretty sure it was fake, or not human anyway.

Time moved quick and slow at the same time. I was so anxious about how people would react to my song and if Heisuke would sing the part right that I barely registered anything till the lights turned off again. Quite a few girls in the crowd moaned in disappointment

Heisuke was on the mic, "My turn! The reason I am doing this is to have fun and enjoy life. I mean really what is life butâ€¦"

"Heisuke we said short." Okita called out, "Time is ticking."

"Whatever!" Heisuke barked.

"Ladies, and gentlemenâ€¦.and everyone in between," Hajime MC'd , "We have decided in light of recent events in our lives, to treat each performance like it were our last. So, as if this were our last we would like to show you who we are." The crowd was deafening. "And so." With each name a spot light shined on the called out members. "Toshizo Hijikata on bass, Sanosuke Harada andâ€¦ Shinpachi Nagakura on drums, Heisuke Todo and â€¦ Souji Okita on guitar, Sannan on bass, keyboard, and violin, and me, Hajime Saito as your vocalist."

I think the girls behind me had aneurysms and died looking at the shirtless Shinsengumi members on stage. _Oh, no, they are still screaming. Oh my, one of them is moaning. That's not healthy._

"Hey Saito," Heisuke called out all of a sudden, "You promised."

"She's gonna kill you~" Souji teased from beside the youngest member.

"Better hope I win then." Hajime said gravely into the microphone. And the whole crowd looked on in confusion as Hajime and Heisuke played rock, paper, scissors center stage. Heisuke beat Hajime paper to rock. I didn't know what that meant, but I thought I knew what that meant.

"Scared for your life, Hajime?" Souji called into his mic, but was ignored as Hajime walked right up to the edge of the stage and look down at the crowd. Spotting us, he walked right up to me and jumped down. The girls behind us went _nuts_. He held his hand out to me,

and they suddenly shut up.

Mic still in hand Hajime looked down at where I sat trying to look smaller. "Please come sing with me?"

I yelled something but Okita, being on a microphone out volume'd me. "For inquiring minds, this is who Hajime there wrote Comatose for, if you remember that song. She wrote the song we will be performing tonight and I guess she will be singing the female part instead of the man child here." He pointed at Heisuke. "Time is ticking Hajime, get her up here."

"Please?" He asked again. Looking around for help I noticed Shukke had disappeared.

"Your just trying to give me a reason to be on stage." I moaned.

"You gave me mine," He countered.

"All these peopleâ€¦" I stared behind me, seeing the glares multiple girls were giving me.

"Just think of it like that time we were alone in yourâ€¦"

"Okay!" I interrupted hastily thinking of all the ways those girls could kill me.

"Well that wasn't hard." Souji joked.

"No not that time," Hajime agreed as he jumped onstage and helped me up.

"That's what she said!" Cat yelled from the crowd.

Hajime ignored her, wisely, but Souji called out, "You want to get up here too, Cat?" It was amazing how quickly she shut up.

Hajime, seeing how nervous I was, quietly stripped off his haori and draped it over my shoulders. "No fear," he whispered to me. "Just keep your eyes on me." Getting louder he shouted into the mic, "Souji, start it up. This is, _Pretty People Never Lie, Vampires Never Really Die."_

The guitars led the song in, with the drummers coming in shortly after. Sannan lifted a violin to his chin and played a counter melody to the song.

_Look how you've grown, it's etched in skin and bone
>Dressed in make-up and bleached out in the roses

>That's hollow and tasteless__, where spirits make love
>and pretty corpses hold their brides
__Do you know__I'd never hurt you?_

(So taste it, taste it)

Hijikata screamed before Souji, Hajime and myself brought in the chorus.

So taste "it" and we will never be alone
>I'll take the first bite, yeah, I am _Ghost__
>_Say goodnight to you__, my darling, my darling_

(Few words can kill me, they inspire in your hands)

The sun outside, look at these glass-shaped walls
>We'll burn the flesh off all these paper dolls

>We won't fall, we'll be together__, __just the two of us
>That's hollow and breathless_, where spirits make love
>I'm lost and lonely through your eyes
__Do you know __I'd never hurt you?_

(So taste it, taste it)

So taste "it" and we will never be alone
>I'll take the first bite, yeah, I am __Ghost__

>_Say goodnight to you__, my darling, my darling_

The boys played a brief musical interlude before Hajime called out,_

>So take this rose, so take this rose

And then another break before I started the refrain

_**Take this rose, and break this bottle of aged pills
>We will sleep â€¦__will sleepâ€¦ __**tonight**__â€¦tonightâ€¦ __**and all through December**__
>Soon she'll growâ€¦_**I'll grow**__
>Angelâ€¦ _**angelâ€¦,**__ put me back together __again__._

(Taste it...)
>(Taste it...)

_So taste "it" __and we will never be alone
>_I'll take the first bite__, yeah, I am Ghost
>Say goodnight to you,_my darling, my darling_

So taste "it" _and we will never be alone
>_I'll take the first bite__, yeah, I am Ghost
>Say goodnight to you,_ my darling, my darling. _

The music stopped abruptly as I noticed Shukke slinking back into her seat, paint smudges on her face.

"Thank you, we are Umarekawaru," Hajime began.

"And we are going to some club named Tilt after this so meet us there yeah?" Souji finished for him, causing girls of all ages to cry out in excitement as he smirked the offer.

The guys ushered me to the backstage area of the venue and right out the door without hearing the standings for next week. Once outside we walked to the front and stood waiting forâ€¦something.

A mob of people, Shukke, Cat, Chizuru and a harried looking Kondou in the lead, bum rushed the front door. Shukke was pulling Cat by the arm who had Chizuru's hand in her own. Souji burst out laughing and Hijikata looked on slightly confused. Hajime then grabbed me and threw me to behind his back, shielding me from the girls who rushed the group of them standing there.

And so, I stood very still behind my boyfriend as women pawed at him and screamed that they loved him in his face. From behind me I heard someone lay on the bus horn in a demand to get on.

I turned and booked it, only vaguely hearing some guy yell, "There she is!" And the slap of sneakers on pavement behind me as the guys of Umarekawaru ran to the bus as well. Almost at the door I stopped in awe. She had done it in time. My design for the bus.

The side of the bus facing us was a graveyard scene, a lone dead tree raising in the back, instruments of suicide hanging from its branches like deadly fruit; a gun, a noose, a razor and a bottle of pills. A lone anatomically correct heart hung from the tree and a skeletal hand grasped for it from the grave directly beneath it. If she did it right, on the other side of the bus the same graveyard would stretch out, but seven graves would be seen, each one jagged and broken. Out of each grave a member of the band would be materializing, half solid, half ghost. The back would be a mausoleum with rich vines and decaying bones climbing up it and scattered at the door. The hood of the bus had the words 'We Live Again' written in big golden letters.

Still staring in wonder, I felt a hand close around my upper arm, dragging me into the bus, Shukke at the wheel. Heisuke, already in his usual seat opened the window above his head and shouted, "See you at Tilt."

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Pretty People Never Lie, Vampires Never Really Die by I Am Ghost. (Umarekawaru's song)

17. Everyday I'm Shufflin: Wait What?

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 16<p>

~Everyday I'm Shufflin'; Wait What~

A couple dozen people were trying to impede our escape from in front of the venue while Shukke lay on the horn as hard as she could. Finally having had enough, she tapped the gas, edging the bus towards the people who blocked us. They scattered, all the while pounding on the door and sides of our ride with vigor and cheers.

"They act like you already won." Cat pointed out surprised.

The response was an awkward silence that stretched till we got to the club.

Getting into the club got a bit sketchy with all the fans arriving around the same time, but Shukke ushered us all right past the line and pulled a ticket out of her jacket pocket. The bouncer looked at it, look at us, and back at it before letting us through the door. They didn't even stamped Chizuru's or Heisuke's hands as they walked by. No one even mentioned the swords at everyone's hips.

I was curious about what that ticket could have been, why we were allowed in with weapons, and as to why the two youngest didn't get underage stamps when they were clearly too young to even be in the club but as we walked in, the sheer number of people overwhelmed me. The atmosphere was chaotic. Machines filled the dance floor with smoke and neon lights blinked on and off to the flashy pop music. The effect had me forgetting the lack of underage stamps, and I didn't even think about how none of us had flashed id.

"Can I get you something to drink?" A man asked me to my left. At first I didn't think he was talking to me until I heard him continue. "You sang beautifully tonight, but you must be thirsty."

I turned to face him, about to politely decline when Hajime grabbed my arm and turned me, waving my favorite soda in my face alluringly. I smile a thank you and turned to address the man who had offered but he was glaring at Hajime who I heard more then saw shrug before dragging me off to the dance floor.

Lollipop, the original version not Umarekawaru's version, came on loud and booming as we arrived to the center of the floor. It took about fifteen seconds for the girls in the surrounding area to sniff him out, all of them dancing on him. He managed to dance in a way that all the girls were included, and I felt slighted. Well more than slighted. I felt fully insulted. I backed away until I was away from the pulse of bodies. Cat caught my eye from where she and Okita were enjoying a drink at the bar and she looked disapproving. Kondou-san, who sat on Okita's other side waved me over.

Sitting next to the older commander of the Shinsengumi I let a single tear fall from my eye, thinking I could hide it. But samurai have good eyes and it wasn't lost on Okita or Kondou. I'm just lucky Cat missed it; I didn't need a Scaredy Neko scene. Though, to be fair, she was far from scared anymore. As if she could read my thoughts, my first best friend stood up from the stool she was sitting on and pulled playfully at Okita's hand.

"Dance with me." She invited. And he shrugged and let her pull him away.

"You know, Bell-san," Kondou half shouted in my ear to be heard over the music.

"It's just Ryane," I reminded him at the slight pause.

"Call me old-fashioned," He joked before continuing. "I have known Hajime-kun for a long time now. He's not very good with women; for

all that he seems to be right now. This music they do, they will have to put on many faces before it's over, 'lady's man' being one of them. Think of this as a test. Let them know he's yours. A day might come when he will have to inform the world, but for now, tonight? It's your job to claim him."

I looked at him shocked. _I hadn't thought of it like that._ I stood and turned to stare at Hajime. He looked disinterested and he was staring at the ground, the ceiling, the lights on the walls. Anywhere but at the girls dancing with him. And then, as if he could feel my eyes on him, he looked right at me. His face transformed into this 'come hither' look and I smiled at him in response. I walked up to him and his gaggle of girls and pulled the one directly in front of him off his chest, taking the place for myself and wrapping my left hand around the back of his neck while my right hooked into the waistband of his Tripps. Bodily pulling him away from the other girls I grinned as the song changed.

"So what's up that you came back?" Hajime asked as we began to dance something like a tango to the violins playing a quick tempo to the rap song blaring through the club. He didn't sound annoyed, but rather relieved.

"Kondou-san, actually." I replied evenly.

"Good to know he's on my side." He mumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" My voice sounded dangerously suspicious in my own ears.

"That's something that I cannot get into, Ryane." He sounded regretful, almost pained, as our dance brought us close.

"These secrets are killing me you know." I admitted as we just stood still in our dance induced embrace, his arms circled around my waist as the many females of the club glared at me.

"Just remember your promise." He muttered as he caught someone's eye behind me. Turning I saw Shukke glaring at him. "And I'll keep mine."

"Wait. What's yours?" But he remained silent on the question and we danced some more.

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

Souji seemed tense. He also seemed to think I was an idiot or something though because he hadn't said a word about it, and I knew he was trying to 'play it cool.' _Men._

Thinking I might as well try to get some information out off him I asked him to dance. I mean, sure he had danced with me before, but we were not going to be swing dancing in a club. And sure, he had grinded with a girl before, but she wasn't me. I would be surprised if he knew what to do, Oni Recall or not. And when he got all hot and tired I would lead him to a secluded part of the bar and ask my questions.

So I left Ryane with Kondou-san knowing I would be having a word with the purple haired idiot before the night was through. She thought I didn't see that tear. They were both gonna get it. Before I could finish a whole song with Souji, home girl was on the move. I happened to be facing Ryane at the time as she threw a girl off her man and dragged him away from all the money grabbing bimbos grinded up on him. I moved to go do some damage control, but Souji grabbed my hips and pulled me back to his rock hard body.

"Don't play super hero, for just one night. Stay with me." His voice was almost pleading and as I turned to him he had those eyes that were just for me. But those unguarded eyes hid something profoundly sad as he looked first at me, and then at Ryane. But then they were the killer's eyes, as I called them, once more and I thought maybe I had imagined it. Turning back I watched Ryane and Saito tango, (_really?)_ their bodies sliding along each other, pressed close and heavy together.

"It's a shame she doesn't dance like you," Souji teased in my ear. "Hajime-kun might lighten up then."

"He seems stressedâ€¦" I probed, but Souji shrugged it off casually.

"I guess being a vocalist is harder than it seems. What would I know? I am just a guitarist." He dodged the searching question with a grin.

"You sing too," I reminded him, but before he could respond the club's DJ was asking for attention.

"Alight, alright, alright y'all, let's get it poppin'. Tonightâ€¦we gonna see who of y'all can shuffle, you feelin' me?" The clubbers all cheered, drowning out all reason. "Now since we got J-Born in the house tonight we are gonna pull those cats up here for a dance against a couple random girls, know what I mean?"

"J-Born?" Souji asked behind me, confused.

"That's you, hot stuff." I said without looking back at him. "No one can pronounce your band name."

He laughed and moved towards the stage. "Wait!" I called out, "Do you even know the dance?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" He shot over his shoulder and jumped on stage to a bunch of screaming girls. "You guys comin' or what?" He called in the microphone. Everyone was on stage except, "Saito get your ass up here, come on."

When they all got up on stage the girls had a bit of a field day. "Alright now, which girls will I choose to dance against them." The DJ asked, tapping his foot and bringing his finger to his chin as if in deep thought. "Let's haveâ€¦you, you, you, you, and you with the green stripes in your hair. We need two more."

"How about Cat and Ryane?" I heard that brat Heisuke ask with a devilish grin.

"Cat and Shukke," Sano advised. Of course they would be on Ryane's

side. "Ryane was forced on stage once already today." Good point, I thought. "We gotta spread the love."

Not good.

"So who are Cat and Shukke, let's go ladies." _Just great._

Shukke was already on her way up the stage's steps which basically meant I couldn't puss out. "Your killing me," I called to the guys when I reached the other side of the stage.

"Don't worry; you'll have a nice funeral." Harada called out cheerfully. The people who heard both of us laughed while everyone else wanted in on the joke.

"We'll try not to make this too painful for you, Cat." Souji offered, pretending to be thoughtful, when really he was just teasing.

"Just try not to fall and bust that pretty face of yours," I was being sarcastic and the ladies in the club basically booed me at the thought.

"Same to you, Cathaâ€¦" He began, sparking my rage.

"Don't be using my government name, how many times have I told you!" But he just laughed at me.

"Anyway," The DJ tried to reign in the chaos. "We'll play the part of the song with the dance sequence and you have to try to emulate the music video for Party Rock Anthem by LMFAO. We'll give you a 5 second count in before the music starts."

"Do you have any idea how unfair it is that they know each other and we don't?" One girl called out as the DJ said "5"

"Quit complaining, we get to watch them move at least." Another yelled at her.

"4"

"They are rock stars. They probably can't dance."

"3"

"Shut up and get ready!" I barked.

"2"

"No you!" Someone shouted as the band members took off their swords.

"1! GO!"

"_EVERYDAY I'M SHUFFLIN!" _The girls with me were sad excuses of shufflers. They were uncoordinated and sloppy and only me and Shukke were even close to being on beat, while the others spent their time watching the guys move.

"_SHUFFLIN SHUFFLIN" _The boys were on point like they had practiced for it or something, which, knowing how things have been going they

probably had.

The DJ yelled, "Freestyle!" as the song blared, _"Party rock is in the house tonight." _And the girls began to dance really erotically, glancing at the members of Umarekawaru who, aside from Souji, were not paying them any attention. And little did they realize it but Souji was looking at me. So I loosened up and did a few flashy pop'n'locks while Shukke did a bunch of isolations.

Souji just laughed though, and one upped me by breaking with Heisuke and Shinpachi. _How did they learn that?_

Ryane must have seen my incredulous look because she moved right to the edge of the stage and yelled, "YouTube sucks eh, Cat?"

I just growled.

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

Tonight had been fun. I had kept my promise, given them all a night to remember. It had been a lot of fun, but it would end soon. In fact, it was hitting midnight, and we Cinderellas had to get home before the dream disappeared.

We had gotten off the stage half an hour ago and immediately the Shinsengumi had been bombarded by girls and some guys who wanted dances with them. Ryane must have finally gotten into her head what it was like to have a rock star as a boyfriend and had sensibly went and sat down at the bar. Cat joined her looking rather disgruntled. And then about fifteen boys had flocked to them and brightened their moods.

Those first drinks were about twenty minutes away from kicking in and that meant Cat and Ryane needed their beds. They were going to kill me. But a promise is a promise. And so, putting a grand smile on my face I went to my two housemates and linked arms with them. "Time to go." I announced with way more cheer than I actually felt, while the boys all groaned in disappointment. As we reached the doors I jerked my head at the guys and they came up with whatever excuse they could to disentangle themselves from their many dance partners. It wasn't until I drove them home and watched Souji go to Cat's room and Hajime slip quietly into Ryane's that I shut my door and lugged myself over to my bed.

From there I lay down and cried myself to sleep. Lifeâ€¦was not fair.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

I don't know what it was, but that night I had trouble keeping my eyes open as soon as I saw my bed. Laying down had only intensified the strong need for sleep I felt. Someone had drugged my drink I was pretty sure. But I had only had the one, which Hajime had handed to me. A Hajime who was seated in his usual corner, or what had used to be his usual corner. But I couldn't bring myself to question why he wasn't in bed, no matter how badly I wanted to. And I couldn't do

anything as I saw watched him stand up at a knock on the door.

"Ry-chan hasn't fallen asleep yet." He muttered to the person on the other side of it. He leaned over me then, kissing me soundly in a way he hadn't in all this time. There was a hint of desperation in it and a strong longing.

I was drifting to sleep when I heard his voice one last time. "My promiseâ€¦ I promise, with every breath I have in this body, that I will find a way to come back to youâ€¦ to be yours again. I promise that no matter what I say, or what I do, I will _always, always _love you." He took a shaky breath, the kind you breathe when you're about to cry. "I won't beg you to forgive meâ€¦" And I could hold out no longer as the drugs he had slipped me finally pushed me into oblivion.

I woke up to Cat's forlorn scream of rage and sadness, and the memories came back to me. Memories of last night, his words. His promise. His _goodbye_.

Memories of Shukke calling him a worthless coward for spending time with me. The band mates who had stared at him in disapproval. Shukke looking like she was going to kill him when they locked eyes last night. That traitor had known. She had known he was leaving, and never said anything. And I knew with certainty that his words last night had been mere words.

The Shinsengumi, including Souji, and more importantly including Hajimeâ€¦

Were gone.

* * *

><p>Kazama's Point of View:<p>

"So that's what Hakuouki has been up to. Music huh? A perfect background for our new era battle. This is good. Kaoru, it looks like you will be useful after all." I shot at the disgrace of an Oni on my right.

"Dibs on guitar." Shiranui said as he turned off the camera he had caught footage of Hakuouki and the other Shinsengumi on.

"How could he dance with girls like that with Chizuru right there, has he no honor, does he care so little for my sister that he can dance like that with thoseâ€¦.those harlots?" Kaoru would devolve anytime now into a blood thirsty little brat so I smacked him roughly.

"You will be on rhythm guitar and a keyboard if we ever have need of it." I ordered him. I swear I don't know why I wasted my time with the insolent, disobedient, honorless child.

Amagiri looked up from the paper he was reading, "I am guessing your on bass and vocals, Kazama? So that leaves me with drums? So be it. How are we going to get signed?"

"Leave that to me." I could feel the smirk on my face and Shiranui

cackled and Amagiri just shook his head, not even bothering with warning caution.

"What will we call ourselves?" The purple haired gun man brought up a good point.

"The Oni Complex." And for once we all agreed.

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Party Rock Anthem by LMFAO

* * *

><p>Don't worry its not over.

18. Gone: The Oni Complex

A/N:

I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of.

* * *

><p>Chapter 17<p>

~Gone; The Oni Complex~

The members of Umarekawaru left the house they had been living in for the past several months late that night with no intentions of ever going back, a certain conference call still very prominent in each of their minds.

"_We at Amalgamated Records are so pleased that you have decided to sign our contract." Their new manager had cheerfully announced the night after the radio broadcast. "As you know, the contract stated that you would abide by any rules or regulations that the company decided to apply to you, and I am calling to acquaint you with some of them."_

"_Alright," Shinpachi had been enthusiastic and exuberant in his high mood. "Let's hear 'em!"_

"_Well, to start, you may bring two people with you on the road. We will be sending a tour bus your way on the ninth, which gives you the chance to play in one more battle. Make sure you keep the lights on this time though, let everyone get a good look at you."_

"_Just two? That would have to be Kondou-san and Chizuru." The members had all agreed, though Souji and Saito had looked a little downcast and concerned. _

Seeing those looks Hijikata had clapped each man on the back and said simply, "I am sure you can get Ryane and Cat to do some sort of long distance relationship with you two."

"_That brings me to the next rule, actually." The manager had piped up officiously. "You are to cut ties with any people you are not taking with you, or that are not in the entertainment industry."_

"_What?!" Souji had roared, beyond pissed. _

"_What would the media or your fans say if you were with, or associating with, people who are basically nobodies? No, you will burn those bridges before they come back to bite you in the ass. And if you are, or rather were, in a relationship you will deny it." After a pause the manager offhandedly offered, "Really it's for their protection too."_

"_Protection?" Saito asked, confused._

"_You never know what a fan will do out of jealousy." The stupid company toad sounded way to chipper about it._

"_But Ry-" The purple haired samurai turned rocker began._

"_It's an order." Hijikata sounded reluctant and half broken giving the command, because he knew that Hajime Saito never disregarded an order given by his superiors. It was an ingrained part of who he was, and how he had been from over one hundred fifty years ago. No matter his own opinion of the imperative he would follow through. No matter how bad it hurt._

Even Shukke, who had been in the room during that call, knew as much, and even she had looked at the crumpled man with sympathy for his coming heart break when he had affirmed in a tired voice, "Yes, sir."

The tour bus that Amalgamated had sent was beautiful, modern and spacious, with a small seating area that managed to fit nine seats around the bus's front section and nine bunked beds with curtains that could be pulled over the front of each for privacy, a small cubby like bathroom, and a locked room for the manager in the back. There was a large screen plasma T.V and a couple laptops supported by the Wi-Fi onboard and a couple different game consoles.

Saito knew he wasn't the only one noting the difference in the seating opposed to patched, under stuffed fake leather and finding the new setting lacking. That and the driver was patient and stoic, not prone to laughter and smiles and cussing like the crazy road raging girls they were used to.

The manager, a broad shouldered man with a small soul patch and sunglasses, even though it was well past midnight, was standing between the sleeping area and the seating area waiting for them to get on. Once everyone was on board he handed them each an IPhone with eight numbers programmed into them. "These are your life-lines." He informed them with a toothy grin. "Add the numbers of celebrities you meet and producers and directors you like. My cell is in there, as are your band mates'. Now what's with the swords? You know what don't answer that, they are cool. We can come up with a story later. Keep em!

"Now I got news that Break Free Records is looking into signing a new act so let's get you to New York to record ASAP. We need your debut

album done yesterday." The manager then locked himself in his room, leaving the Shinsengumi to themselves.

"This is not how I imagined things going." Souji admitted as the bus started up. His usual smirk had given way to a frown and there was a lot of darkness in his eyes.

Just when he was actually starting to look happy. Saito thought, annoyed with what was happening and how it was happening. _ Just when I was starting to be happy._

But it was clear to the whole band that Amalgamated Records did not care overly much about their bands. They just wanted the most record sales possible out of mindless music machines.

It was with this in mind that Shinpachi and Harada exchanged a look before erasing the number the manager had given them for his own cell and added a different number as the house they could never return to quickly disappeared from view.

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

Kazama had a plan. And as he stood outside of Break Free Records headquarters in the ever bustling city of New York he thought to himself, _This ought to be fun._ He had even bought a suit for the occasion. And so walking in with head held high the Oni headed for the elevator after a quick glance at the directory on the wall.

"Hey... where do you think you're going with that?" A man in a security uniform tried to make a move towards him, like he would dare detain him.

"Oh, this?" Kazama gestured to the sword at his belt, "It's just a reminder of my past, a relic older than anything you could hope to own, and more valuable than your life. I don't intend to cut anyone with it today. You see I promised my band mate, Amagiri, that I would keep the scenes to a minimum."

"That's it, you're coming with me. What hospital did you escape from?" The guard asked unkindly. Kazama waited, and as the man came towards him, slowly, cautiously, the guard blinked and Kazama was gone; using flash steps to get away from the situation and up the stairs.

_He's lucky Amagiri is a pacifist, for a protector of the peace he was quite rude. _And with that thought, Kazama continued up the stairs to the top floor of the building and right into the boardroom where the CEO was holding a meeting. _Ah, perfect._

"What is the meaning of this?" The CEO demanded. "Someone call security."

A large woman with brown hair and way too much gold half stood, reaching for the call button in the middle of the table. Kazama just drew his sword and slashed the button and the box it pushed into, destroying the hope of help. The woman screamed.

"Now now, I promised I wouldn't kill anyone, and killing the lot of you would be counter-productive to my needs. Soâ€¦ Who here knows anything about Oni?" Kazama's red eyes scanned the people seated around the mahogany table that took up most of the room and scoffed at their terrified expressions. "Well this will be enlightening for you then.

"Oni are demons. Oh you laugh, but it's true. They originate from Japan, actually. Now-a -days you think Oni are trolls with red skin carrying iron maces and bring bad luck. But that is far from the truth. I am here today to tell you, Oni look like man. But are faster, stronger, better. I don't suppose I should be telling you this. But I have use for this company, and as such I feel it should be out in the open. Saves me from answering questions later on."

"Are you trying to say that you are an Oni or whatever?" The CEO asked at the head of the table.

Kazama flash stepped the length of the room and stopped right in the man's face. "You tell me." Again the woman screamed. "Now," Kazama slowly gave in to his true form transformation, his eyes turning yellow and his hair white. Small horns poked through that now white hair. "To really blow your mind. My companions and I are all Oni. The four of us came through time and space from Japan 1879, ten years after a certain Oni female brought a group of Shinsengumi officers forward to Rochester, New York. One of them is Hakuouki, a man I plan to destroy even now. I told him I would fashion a modern day duel with him, and you seeâ€¦that is where you come in. He and his men formed a band, Umarekawaru. So we formed one too, and our goal is to sell more records then them, to win this duel. You are not to release any of this information to the press. We will deal with them. If you do, well... the Douji-giri Yasutsuna is rather thirsty, perhaps I shall pierce your flesh with it and let it feast on your blood. Have I made myself clear?"

"So you only want a record deal?" The CEO looked confused but there was a gleam of greed in his eyes that humans could be counted on.

"At least." Kazama acknowledged with a nod. "Or at least we can start with that."

"What do you call yourself?"

"The Oni Complex," the Oni informed the room, horns slowly receding as his coloring went back to normal. He calmly adjusted his sword at his belt and walked to the door. Reaching into his pocket the blonde threw a card at the CEO, who flinched in fear. "This is where you can reach us, if I don't hear back from you in, oh, two days? I will know where to find you. It would be wise to not keep us waiting."

* * *

><p>Walking the few short blocks to the penthouse suite he and the other Oni were renting, Kazama had time to think about how severely he just broke the laws of his kind. Then again he had been disgraced in his quest for dominance over Hakuouki before, this was not anything new. And he viewed it just as necessary. All things considered, though, Amagiri would not approve.<p>

The press of people walking down the New York street was impressive, and Kazama could not help but marvel at the new heights of society in this era. The people, the trends, the technology. It was all fascinating to him. But while fascinated, Kazama could not help but compare. And he found he missed wilderness and dirt roads through markets. He missed clashing swords as well. Now any chump with a gun and decent aim could become a killer, and with so many people in the streets a randomly fired shot could create death without much opposition; not like walking the streets of Kyoto knowing that if you had to start something there was someone there who could finish it.

To Kazama, it was not so new, to be honest. Not many humans could cross blades with him and live longer than a pass or two, so having a weapon to counter with was more often than not superfluous. But this new way of street killing seemed unfair to the average mortal.

Kazama took the elevator in the building he was staying in to their rooms, sighing at how slow it was when he could _step_ much faster to where he needed to be. Drumming his fingers along the hilt of his sword, the blonde Oni pointedly ignored the attendant's attempt to make conversation after he told the idiot what floor to push.

Finally getting annoyed with the attendant's stuttering babble, he fixed the man with a glare, sizing up how little effort it would take to shut him up. He was surely the most simple-minded individual Kazama had laid his red eyes on since coming forward, so a simple, "Silence," sufficed.

The elevator, which was quite the fascinating contrivance in its own right, stopped at the top floor and opened its doors swiftly releasing both Oni and terrified human from the cloying atmosphere the fear oozing off of the attendant had created. There was only one door in the hallway and Amagiri stood in it waiting to receive the leader of their small group.

"You kept the dramatics to a minimum, I hope." He said by way of greeting.

"I did what I had to do," Kazama drawled.

"You always do," Shiranui said with contempt, "And we end up paying for your audacity."

"Don't encourage him." Amagiri warned.

"Did it work?" The purple haired Oni asked, ignoring the large fist fighter.

"They will be calling in the next two days. I threatened to go back if they don't comply."

"You didn't kill anyone did you?" Amagiri asked, a slight hint of disapproval already creeping into his voice.

"An Oni always keeps his word." Kazama replied laconically.

"And you promised not to, I understand." Amagiri bowed slightly at the waist before moving out of the doorway and letting the aloof leader in.

It was then that the phone rang.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

I didn't want to get out of bed ever again. I couldn't face either of my housemates, but for two separate reasons. Shukke because I was so mad at her I might slice her with the sword I still found in my possession, and Cat because it was all my fault that she was in pain.

Shukke had known, for however long, that the members of the Shinsengumi were leaving. She knew and had chosen to keep it to herself for whatever reason. I was so mad at her I couldn't think about her without seeing red.

Cat, on the other hand. She had been scared of the Shinsengumi from day one. But somehow I had decided to make it a point to foist them upon her. Memories of that first night crept back, and those damning words I had spoken to her as we huddled to discuss that the swordsmen would be staying with us.

You know, Catâ€¦ If you give them a chance you might even like them.

And she had liked themâ€¦one of them in particular. And he had acted like he liked her. I had been so sure he had. Remembering that first anguished scream, I realized my push had landed her too far into his world, and now he was gone. If I hadn't tried to get her to talk to them, to him, this parting would be met with relief. It was my faultâ€¦her pain, that screamâ€¦all my fault.

My door creaked open and Cat's haggard form walked in. "You know what the last thing he told me was?" She sounded so desolate. I didn't get the chance to answer before she told me, "He told me 'Even if this was my last night on earth, it would not be my last night with you, Cat'. And then the stupid drug he put in my drink took hold of me and I couldn't ask what he meant, or say anything at all."

Shukke was standing behind her, looking miserable as well, like she was about to say something that she really thought would be a bad idea to say. "He didn't drug your soda." She told her softly, causing my pain-struck friend to round on her, "I did."

Cat's immediate response was to punch the other woman in the face, but once she started pummeling Shukke, she didn't stop.

"Cat," I called sounding uninterested in my own ears. "Cat, get off her."

Shukke had her arms over her hard, covering her face, and was curled in the fetal position. I got around to dragging myself off my bed when Cat started kicking. I pulled my distraught friend off the traitor reluctantly, because I knew I really wanted to join in instead.

"Why?" Cat shouted, her anger boiling over as she struggled in my arms. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I promised. It was the only way we could think of, and I can't explain what is going on but trust themâ€¦ trust me." Shukke said hoarsely from the punch she had taken to her throat.

"Why should we?" I asked trying not to sound as hurt as I really was. "Why couldn't he have just told me what was wrong. What? I wasn't worth his trust? But you were?"

"Because he had to protect you." Shukke croaked, hand still on her throat.

"Pfft" I sounded off rudely. "This is protecting me? Breaking my heart? Funny!"

"You don't have any idea how hard it was for them, so don't act likeâ€¦" Shukke fired up.

"Oh yeah, so hard to drug me so I can't say goodbye! So he doesn't have to tell me properly!" I shouted, equally heated.

"What was the last thing he told you? What was his promise? Did he tell you that secret which he kept from everyone else as his heart was breaking? Think back on that and tell me he doesn't love you, Ryane." Shukke shouted at me, furious as my doubt.

"If he loved me, he would have said it properly." I seethed. "He would have said goodbye properly before going off and doing whatever he is doing. What is he doing anyway? Or can you not tell us _that_ either?"

Shukke surprised me by answering. "They got signed. The radio broadcast was a test run to see what the public would think of them. Iâ€¦"

"Who cares?" Cat interrupted, punching my wall in frustration. "I guess they just didn't need us anymore."

* * *

><p>Cats Point of View:<p>

I was so done with everything. I was tired of feeling, I was tired of Ryane pretending she didn't feel, and I was tired of Shukke sticking up for those bastards like they could feel. I pushed past the lying bitch and made my way back to my room. There I flopped on my bed and read the words Souji had left for me. These I wouldn't share. Somehow they seemed sacred.

If I am unable to move,_**
>_**Then the Darkness shall separate**_**

>_**Flowers and Water**

I didn't know what the poem meant, but his next words meant the world to me, even though I was so mad at him I could barely hold it in.

**Begging isn't in my nature.
>But just this once,
Please wait for me,
>So I can tell you how much I love youâ€¦
Face to Face.**

Okita Souji.

_I will give you a while. _I thought when I read that. _But only a while. And I will work on Ryane too. Saito is your best friend after all._

* * *

><p>The poem in Souji's note was written by the real Okita Souji shortly before he died of Tuberculosis in 1868 in Osaka. He was 22 or 24, no one really knows what year he was born. I thought I would add it.

19. Radio Edit: Learning

A/N:

HUGE thanks to WhiteSaille for compiling a playlist for this fanfic. If your interested in what the songs sound like that have been used so far please check out,

**www . bit . ly / 14wYVSC
>**or
>www . youtube playlist?list=PLOKa8YslLki8lm65tAHHTQ-FEIlwVLrHu&feature=view_all

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 18<p>

~Radio Edit; Learning~

"What do you mean, 'you can't swear on the radio'?" Harada asked in genuine confusion.

The DJ at the radio station they were all crammed in just sighed as one of the technicians smilingly explained again, "You can't swear."

"What? Why not?!" Okita griped, equally baffled.

"You just can't," the other tech in the room shot at him.

"What about in Japanese?" Shinpachi suggested while the others looked up hopefully.

"No!" The second tech almost shouted while the first tech explained, "It might offend someone who knows the language."

"Any other rules we need to know? Forgive us it is our first time on

the radio." Hijikata asked with a slight bow.

"Just that your manager wanted to remind you of your contract, whatever that means." The second tech answered.

"We are well aware of our contract terms, if you have a means to please assure him of that." The long haired vice commander told the man with another, slightly deeper bow.

"Hey technician person?" Okita called suddenly.

"What?" The second tech snapped.

"Are we allowed to say 'shut up' on the radio?"

"â€¦Yeah." He replied, sounding very annoyed.

"Good 'cause Heisuke rambles so it's kinda necessary."

"I do not, Souji!" Heisuke almost yelped as the smirking samurai pulled his hair.

"You kinda do, Chibi-chan." Harada had joked, which caused Heisuke to pout with his arms folded over his chest.

"We are on in five people, get ready." The first technician called scuttling out of the room.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

Shukke's phone went off while she was driving us God knows where at eight o'clock one Saturday night not long after the boys had left us, we definitely were not going to watch the battles so I was having a hard time figuring out exactly where she was taking us. I tried not to think about them, really I did. But some things just sparked a memory and there were places I couldn't go anymore without being hit by this feeling of sorrow and incompleteness. The mall, the diner, the park. I couldn't do it. Especially the park. We spent so much time there together.

I still hoped though. I hoped I would get an answer to why this happened. I hoped he would come back to me and tell me he was sorry and that he loved me. Shukke made it seem like this wasn't the end, and even though I was still so mad at her I could barely look at her, I wanted to believe in her notions. After Cat had delivered her beat down to our housemate, Shukke had made herself scarce. I didn't like unhappy homes though so three days ago I had called them both into the living room and we made a truce.

Cat and I would not get mad at Shukke over anything to do with the Shinsengumi. That was the agreement. I had figured Shukke wouldn't try any more shenanigans so I didn't add anything about her not starting anything in the treaty. I should have.

Shukke stopped at a red light and turned on the mostly unused radio in the bus. It worked just fine; we just never saw the need for such a distraction. Turning the station to KISS 106.7 we heard the DJ who had introduced the nation to Umarekawaru coming in loud and clear

over the airwaves.

"_Hey it's DJ __White Saille with our guest for you on the countdown to number one this week with the Billboard Top 40. I wanna give a warm welcome to Umarekawaru today. This is the band you heard from Rochester a couple weeks ago. So fellas, I see you got signed!"_

I almost cried as I heard Saito's voice over the radio as I gripped his sword, which I still kept on me as a sign of my hope, so tightly my knuckles turned white.

"_We were actually in the process of signing a deal when you so kindly played our song. I guess the company decided to use that as a test to see what the public thought."_

"_It's because of the positive comments you all made that we were able to finalize the deal, so thank you so much for your support." _It almost sounded like Hijikata was bowing.

"_Now," _DJ White Saille began. _"I got to watch and listen to you guys as you chilled in the studio before we got on the air and I gotta say, for seven people in the band you all seem to fit well together. So far I have only pegged a couple of you though. Guitarist Souji Okita is like the trickster, the jokester. And your bassist, Toshizo Hijikata is more like the leader of the group. What about the rest of you? What are your personalities like?"_

"_Well Hijikata is more like a komori than a leader." _Souji announced while the other members burst into laughter.

"_Komori..?"_ Saille asked, confused.

"_It means babysitter in Japanese." _Sannan informed her while the others were still laughing._ "Something in high demand with these immature idiots."_

"_Oh yeah, Sannan," _Harada snapped, still laughing_, "You are definitely above the need for a babysitter aren't you?"_

"_I seem to remember a certain glasses wearing buffoon accidently hitting the breaker where we were staying and turning off the lights, like an idiot." _Shinpachi reminded as Harada and Heisuke roared in amusement at the memory.

"_I bet the people you were staying with got mad at that." _White Saille prodded.

"_Nah," _Heisuke chirped, _"They never got mad at us, just annoyed."_

"_I'm sure that is no longer the case."_ Saito murmured quietly. Getting louder he tried to steer the conversation to safer territory. _ "In answer Sannan, who plays violin, keyboard and bass is our brainy guy. I believe one of our hosts liked to call him 'science enthused' from time to time."_

"_Yeah, and Saito, or Hajime I guess I should call ya. Is the calm one. Takes a lot to rile this guy up. He's the vocalist by the way." _Harada pointed out.

"_What about me? Huh, huh?" _Heisuke piped up, excitedly.

"_You're the jail bait." _Shinpachi shot_._

"_Why you little!" _The youngest began, annoyed.

"_You're the little one here!" _Shinpachi interrupted rudely.

I couldn't help but laugh. They were the same as always and that was reassuring.

"_I have to ask," _the DJ cut in_, "Why do you call each other by your last names? Like you called Hajime by the name Saito."_

"_It's a Japanese thing, something from the culture we came from." _Hijikata informed her.

"_I guess they don't call you J-Born for nothing then huh?" _Saille asked. _ "How do you feel about your fan's calling themselves J-Born Agains on your website? Does it bother you?"_

"_J-Born Agains, huh?" _Souji asked with a cocky voice, you could almost hear his smirk over the air. _ "Well we aren't really tied into any one religion, our name means something more than that. So it's not really offensive to _us_ if you use a religiously connotative name to describe yourselves. And we can't say, 'no you can't' and shake our fingers at you."_

"_What does your name mean then, if it has nothing to do with religion?" _Saille questioned_._

"_It's a secret," _Hijikata said, sounding chipper.

"_O-ho, well let's take some calls, the boards are going crazy." _ DJ White Saille announced._ "hi you're on the air!"_

"_Hey I am wondering how experienced you guys are with girls!" _The girl on the other line simpered.

"_So much it could make your head spin."_ Harada boasted.

"_All of you?" _The girl asked, excited.

"_Even the jail bait." _Shinpachi said with a laugh.

"_Would you stop calling me that!"_ Heisuke shouted.

"_You make us sound easy."_ Sannan complained.

"_You see,"_ Hajime explained softly. _"We come from a lifestyle based on two things. One, living life to the fullest because you couldn't tell which day would be your last, and two by defending our ideals with everything we had. Some of us were a little more into the first part then the second. But we all know what it is to fight."_

"_Is that what the swords at each of your hips are for?" _DJ White Saille asked.

"_These swords are a reminder of our lives and our history."

_Hijikata clarified.

"_Most of you have two swords, but Hajime and Souji have one eachâ€¦why?" _The DJ sounded confused.

"_The missing swords serve as reminders elsewhere." _Souji explained vaguely.

"_I would ask, but we are running a little short on time so let's get back to the lines now!" _DJ Saille veered back to the program.

"_Hey, I got a question for Hajime." _The speaker said, her voice almost purring.

"_Okay," _Saito answered._ "What's on your mind?"_

"_Well I saw a YouTube video of your last performance in Rochester and I have to knowâ€¦Is the girl you brought onstage your girlfriend? Souji said you wrote Comatose for her."_

There was a pause, and I thought to myself, 'this is it, he's gonna tell the world about me!'

"_It's true I wrote Comatose for her, but she never returned my feelings. No she is not my girlfriend."_

I crashed down emotionally. I couldn't believe it. He had lied, used me. What the hell.

"_And before anyone else asks, so we don't have to go down the list, none of us have girlfriends, free and clear for all you out there." _Souji announced happily_. _

Cat punched the seat in front of her and growled, sounding more feral then I had ever heard her. I could tell she was trying not to scream at the betrayal again, like she had that first morning. I figured she would have, but the windows were open to let the balmy (for march with global warming) air into the bus. I saw her pull out her cell phone like she was going to call the radio program.

"_Well Umarekawaru has time with us for one more question and then it's back to the countdown so look forward to their single coming out sometime real soon. Hi, you're the last question."_

Cat hung up her phone in frustration before a very familiar voice, at least to Shukke and me, came on the radio.

"_My question concerns the whole band."_ The man began _"It is three-fold. One: are you ready for our modern day duel, Umarekawaru? Two: what will you do when I tell the world what your precious name means? And three: since you are no longer using Chizuru perhaps I could have her now, yes? Since you're all single, Hakuouki."_

"_I'll answer him." _Hijikata said through gritted teeth_. "Three: not on your life. Two: We'll talk when you do. One: Bring it on, Kazama!"_

"_Look forward, then, to the Oni Complex." _ The clicking sound that heralded the end of the call was lost as Harada and Shinpachi began

to laugh.

"_Those bastards couldn't come up with a better band name then the Oni Complex?" _ Heisuke crowed._ "How original." _Something like three slaps sounded and the laughter stopped.

"_Behave." _Hijikata growled.

"_See," _Sannan said laughingly,_ "komori."_

My hope was dying but I still held on to the sword that was all I had left of him with my last shreds. He wouldn't have left it if he weren't coming back. I know he wouldn't have. Saito loved his swords. He wouldn't leave one with a nobody.

Cat had been reduced to a litany of swear words a trucker would have blushed at. Shukke just continued to drive after turning the radio to the rock station. Ten minutes later she parked and opened the bus door as if she expected us to get out. Looking out the window I saw the Ten Ugly Battles venue.

"You're kidding right?" Cat asked in a monotone voice, clearly spent in terms of emotional response to anything.

"Come on, one more time?" Shukke cajoled.

Cat really must have been on an energy low because she didn't even bother arguing. She just stood up mechanically and headed out into the now chilly parking lot.

"Ryane?" Shukke asked in a coaxing voice.

"Last time." I informed her, to which she fist pumped the air and lead us to the venue.

The Battle went on like nothing had changed aside from the announcement the hosts had made at the beginning letting everyone know that Umarekawaru was no longer in the competition because rules stated signed bands could not participate. I had half expected them to somehow be there since Shukke had so pushed to get us in here. Or at least nothing had changed untilâ€¦

"Hey we are 14Phantom! We want to thank you for all the support you have given us but regrettably this will be our last performance this year. We don't want to win as if by default because the best band here is no longer competing. So for our last song we want to play this piece in thanks. This is _Turn Up The Stars._"

And as the jazz melody of their thank you song reached in and gripped my heart, the positive words floated through my ears.

_Boy you gotta look at the sky and wonder in amazement
>Get your pretty eyes up off the pavement
Just stop wherever you are
>Turn up the music
Turn up the stars
>Whoa
Oh
>Oh

I don't understand why everybody's in this big rush to get somewhere

>Oh
>They are always in a hurry
>Always worrying about this and that and somethings else

>And your head's still down
>Your eyes are still frowning
>You are simply drunk man.

As their last song for the sake of their pride finished and the band members bowed a final farewell I felt that positive emotion slip away. Stupid Umarekawaru. It's their fault such a good band gave up. I stood up and joined the standing ovation being given by a crowd that was tinged with disappointment.

I got up and walked out before the rankings were announced. It didn't really matter to me. I just wanted to say something to the girl who sang for 14Phantom. So I ran to the backstage entrance behind the venue building and waited. But then, as the door opened and the band walked out looking haggard and downcast, I lost what I was going to say.

"Oh," The vocalist said, stopping in front of me. "You're that chick who sang with Umarekawaru last week." Her band mates looked kind of shocked that I was standing there waiting for them. "If you're here to gloat I don't think it will matter too much, to be honest."

"No! Why would I gloat? I just came here to say something, but it has somehow slipped my mind. I guess it wasn't important." I smiled and when it seemed they were taking that grin the wrong way I explained hastily. "I was just thinking, 'I hope 14Phantom comes back next year and wins by a landslide.' I mean it. I really loved your music, and you guys had this great stage presence."

"We don't plan to play next year." I frowned at that, but she continued. "Signed bands can't participate right? We plan to get a contract before the year is up." With that they began to walk away.

"Hey wait!" I called out, causing the girl to stop, though the band continued on. "What is your name? I'll look for it in the magazines."

"Ferah," She answered with a smile. "My name is Ferah Sinest. Yours?"

"Ryane Bell." I told her, returning the smile warmly. "Good luck 14Phantom!" I knew it wouldn't be the last time I saw Ferah and her band.

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

"Well you've made your declaration, now do you mind helping with the creative process?" Shiranui drawled as he looked at the Oni Complex's vocalist through his peripherals.

"Coming up dry?" Kazama mocked casually.

"We could have at least had a song or two completed before announcing

ourselves like that on a national radio broadcast. But how could he say he was single to everyone? Does Chizuru really matter so little to him? This is why I don't like humans." Kaoru would have continued if not for Kazama smacking him with the sheath of his sword. "Ouch!"

"Calm yourself, Kaoru." The blond Oni warned. "As it turns out I have a few songs already planned out to start with. I will write them out some time tomorrow. We should really practice with those instruments the company sent up for now. I believe the one with three strings is mine."

After a few minutes of making a racket Kaoru slammed his hands onto his keyboards keys in disgust.

"This is not as easy as the Recall makes it seem." He whined.

"Take it slower then." Amagiri advised with infinite patience as he continued to pound out a slow and simple beat to get used to his drums various components.

"How long did it take the Shinsengumi to learn?" Shiranui asked while he plucked at his guitar's strings, only half paying attention to the rhythm on the music sheet in front of him.

"They were good enough to compete in a little over a month." Amagiri informed the group in an unimpressed tone.

"We don't have that long. We will learn in three days max. Quit messing around." Kazama ordered.

"Pfft, easy!" Shiranui half laughed as he picked up the pace with his playing.

"Let's do this!" Kaoru cheered which caused the other three Oni to roll their eyes while Kazama smacked him with the Douji-giri's sheath again.

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

The radio broadcast had been grueling and the band couldn't help but miss their normal Saturday night Battle routine. But thinking about that life always brought the girls to mind, and it was hard on all of them to have left them behind.

"Now I kinda wish I hadn't sent that message to make sure they were listening. If they ever find out Shukke is still in league with us they might kill her next time." Shinpachi whispered to his best friend.

"Well, Souji still managed to throw in that the swords were left with them for a reason, so it's not for nothing." Harada whispered back. "I still can't believe Cat would snap like that."

"What you think Shukke would have lied about getting her ass whooped by one of her best friends?" the spikey haired Captain asked in horror.

"No, just saying, I feel bad for them."

"Yeah, best not to tell Souji about that though, the ass beating I mean." Shinpachi remind him.

Hijikata walked right up behind one of his whispering band mates and tapped him on the shoulder. Causing the drummer with long red hair to jump and spin around in shock.

"Not that I care overly much, but whispering on your phone in a corner of some radio station is really suspicious and that toad of a manager already watches us enough. Don't make it worse on all of us because you and Shinpachi get caught scheming." The vice commander scolded. "Other peoples' happiness is at stake."

"Yeah," Harada muttered as the long haired bassist walked away, "at least you didn't have to tell your happiness goodbye." Turning back to his phone he heard a dial tone in his ear. "See you on the bus then." He said in that same low tone as he began the trek from his dark corner in the station to that eyesore they called their tour bus.

Meanwhile Souji and Hajime were huddled up talking about songs for the album that was almost complete and what their first single should be.

"It should be a love song," Souji was arguing.

"They would never allow that." Hajime countered.

"Then write a love song that doesn't seem like a love song." The guitarist reasoned with a smirk. "If they can't tell, but she can, it's win-win. Or, we can take our chances trying to explain that we figure it's what our fans would want to hearâ€¦ I mean you heard those girls on the broadcast. The company can't complain if it's to sell records."

"This is such a terrible situation." The vocalist complained. He wasn't much of a whiner, but it was hard being separated from the one you love. The obstacle in question was definitely worthy of complaint.

"It's definitely something we have never faced before. I mean I am pretty sure people thought I was a sadist, right? Sadists aren't the type of people who fall in love. And you've never had a womanâ€¦like the rest of us you have just been with them. But I guess all we can do is hope things turn out ok. " Souji clapped his best friend on the back. "I'm not one to let things ride out on hope though, so let's make a song they will recognize as being for them."

"Let's go try to convince the manager that our fans would die for a love song." Hajime said by way of agreement.

It took a solid hour of hard talk to get the manager to agree to the love song. In that time, Hajime came up with lyrics and an idea for a melody line. When they had permission the two friends put their heads together and began to write with the women they loved and left behind in the forefront of their minds.

* * *

><p>Songs Used:

Turn Up The Stars by Hey! Ocean. (14Phantom's song)

20. Debut Songs: The Challenge Begins

**A/N **

Hey in reply to a concern from a review who I couldn't write to, I try to update this around every ten days. So here you go!

Disclaimer: ****I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of.

* * *

><p>Chapter 19<p>

~Debut Songs; The Challenge Begins~

Cat's Point of View:

Exactly one week after hearing the guys denounce us on a national radio program Shukke was driving us around again. I knew Shukke was still up to something. I would have to be a special kind of stupid to not notice that but I had decided after that first day that I would give in to hope and let her scheme.

I was shaken after that broadcast, it's true, but I still wanted to believe in Souji. In Souji's love. So, knowing Shukke was up to something, I didn't complain when she herded us into the bus again and, as 8 o'clock rolled around, turned on the radio, this time to the rock station 94.1 the ZONE.

"_Welcome back to the ZONE at 94.1_," The DJ came in clearly after the commercial break the station was on when she tuned in. "_It's time for the battle zone. Remember if you vote a song through to the next round five nights in a row it becomes a part of regular rotation. I hope you all remember the current champion, Macklemore and his song, Thrift Shopping. They have won three nights in a row. Tonight's challenger is the much anticipated Umarekawaru and with their debut singleâ€¦ let's give it a listen. This is Your Nickel Ain't Worth My Dime."_

There was the sound of a filled, crowded room and then Saito was singing through the noise before the music picked up.

_I found a love that swept me off of my feet
>Found a baby, she's the finest thing this boy had ever seen

It was a love song, and I had a feeling it was for Ryane and me.

_She'd pick you up,
>and make you wanna fall hard
When I step out on the scene, they shout
>Oh my god!
_

>The chorus came in and I smiled.<p>

_I wanna write a song about you now, yeah
>Something that would make you wanna start
I wanna write a song about you now, yeah
>Something from the bottom of my heart
_
>I wanna take ya home
I wanna take ya home
>
>Damn, this girl, can't find nobody like her
She is everything I want and I'd do anything for her
>I'd beg, beg, and beg
Make me believe that there is no one else I need
>When you satisfy me
_
>They still loved us, still wanted us.<p>

_I'll take you home
>We can be alone
And let my body show you lovin' like it's never ever known
>
>I couldn't help it. That hope in me grew and I thought to myself, This song is for us, no matter what they say. Looking over at Ryane I saw tears in her eyes, but the look on her face was not a happy or relieved one. She looked, in a word, pissed.

It made me want to hit her.

How could she not see this was our song? That this was definitely written with us in mind. The song ended and the DJ was back on the air. He announced the current champion's song, Thrift Shopping, again and I almost laughed at the first lines of the starting verse,

_Now walk into the club like "What up?! I got a big c*ck!"__**

>__Nah, I'm just pumped, I bought some shit from the thrift shop__**
>__Ice on the fringe is so damn frosty__**
>__The people like "Damn, that's a cold ass honky"_

But I couldn't laugh when Ryane looked like that. Thankfully Shukke stopped at a convenient red light and I moved over to my best friend's seat in the back. "What's your issue?" I asked, trying to sound light and joking. I knew she would get that I wasn't making fun of her or being rude; that my question came from concern.

"He's using me again." Ok I wasn't expecting that. Was she stupid?

"Huh?" I prompted eloquently.

"He said I don't love him to gain sympathy and now he writes this?" Tears were still flowing down her face.

I hit her. Not hard, but enough to knock some sense into her. When she looked up at me in anger I just asked, "What were the last things he told you?"

"I don't want to talk about it." God, she was stubborn.

"Because you know it has to do with this. Don't worry; I won't make you tell me even though I know it would prove my point." I said

reassuringly. "I think they will be back. But let's not wait for them."

Shukke must have been listening because she slammed on the breaks at that moment and half turned to us while horns blared all around us.

"Let's go to them," I continued. "We will go to the first show nearby and see them face to face. They won't have a choice but to explain, since they love us." As I finished my sentiment Shukke turned back around and continued to drive. Yeah, she was definitely up to something.

Shukke stopped the bus a short while later and again opened the door in an attempt to herd us out. We were at the mall.

"If you want to see them again I am not letting you go in rags. Come, we are off to Hot Topic for some finery. No whining." She announced before half dragging us to the mall entrance. Thankfully it wasn't Greece Ridge or I don't think Ryane would have come with.

Ryane and I were in the dressing room when I heard Shukke's phone go off, signaling that she had received a text message.

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

The band as a whole had been practicing for hours when Hijikata finally called for a break. It was during that ten minute break that Shinpachi's and then Harada's phones went off. Luckily the manager was elsewhere at the time.

_They are planning to come to the closest show you perform at.

>-Shukke.

The best friends shared a look before typing in messages of their own.

_That is not good. They can't do anything yet.

>-Shinpachi

And

_Can you dissuade them without losing your cover?

>-Harada.

But Harada already knew that there was not going to be a way to convince Ryane or Cat to stay away let alone without explaining the situation to the two girls. And as long as Okita and Saito believed keeping them in the dark was the best way to protect their loved ones, and their loved ones' hearts, the promise Shukke made to them was absolute, no matter how hard he and Shinpachi tried to get her to see reason.

The problem was that the band was not famous enough to break the rules laid out by the company and therefore by the contract without

fear of losing that contract and they weren't famous enough to have a company that would immediately resign them. And despite only having been in this time for a little over three months, as a whole the members of their band liked what they were doing. It had started with Saito liking that he could improve the life of the girl he liked through song and grew from there to everyone being able to impact the people who listened. They all wanted more fans, and through those fans more fame, so that they could eventually affect the world.

That growing fame was a problem in itself though. The toad they called a manager had made it very clear that the more fans, the more fame, they accumulated the more dangerous it was to have a significant other that was not protected by an equal amount of fame.

And now, Harada would have to explain why the two girls would be at the show to the two love sick band mates. He knew they would not explain themselves or break the contract, though he wished things were that simple. And so the heart ache would continue. _It's like thoseâ€¦what are they called, Soap Operas. I could jot this all down and make millions as a writer. _

Erasing the message from his phone, Harada looked over at Shinpachi and as he got closer offered, "Divide and conquer?"

"Dibs on Hajimeâ€¦he's not violent at least." Shinpachi said loud enough for the rest of the band to hear.

"Yeah we'll see about that." Harada murmured to him. "Souji, let's go for a quick walk."

"Anything you have to say to us should probably be said to the whole band." Hajime reasoned. "Especially if you have been breaking the rules and contacting _them._"

"Busted!" Heisuke shouted playfully.

"Not all of them," Harada reasoned quickly. "Just Shukke."

"Yeah, and Shukke has some bad news." Shinpachi added reluctantly.

"What is it? Is Ryane hurt?" Hajime asked, unable to help himself.

"Is Cat?" Souji fired a half second later.

"No, but they are going to get hurt. And so are you." Harada explained about the girls hearing the broadcast and Shukke texting them the information that they would be going to the closest show they could get to. "You have to keep up the act."

"To their faces," Shinpachi added as if the two didn't realize how hard it was going to be. "When they can answer back. They won't be drugged and falling asleep. And there will be fans all over. And our manager will probably be there too. You're going to have to treat them like everyone else. Or ignore them."

"Fuck!" Souji shouted before turning around and punching a wall.

"Seppuku is not an option, correct?" Hajime asked, causing several of his band mates to chuckle nervously, unsure if he was kidding.

Souji seemed to get it though, because he roughly clapped his best friend on the shoulder and said, "If we did that they would find a way to the afterlife and kill us again themselves."

"I suppose your right, Souji." Saito affirmed before looking down at his sneakered feet. "Let's just get back to work and worry about it later."

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><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

"_And tons of positives for Umarekawaru, that makes five nights of win. These guys are on the rotation for the best new rock in Rochester. That's right, right here at the ZONE 94.1." _Kazama hit the X on the top right corner of the browser page, closing the window that was playing the broadcast.

"So," The CEO of Break Free Records looked at his newest band, "You're saying we are supposed to give this trackâ€¦which we have not heard, to the Billboard top 40 program that plays every weekâ€¦without hearing it first?"

Kazama pinched the bridge of his nose and turned back to the meeting he was supposed to be participating in. Shiranui was laughing at his irritated expression and Amagiri looked away, possibly giving a silent prayer that Chikage kept his calm.

"Look Chikage," The CEO began, only to be interrupted by a snarl, "Sorry, sorry I meant Kazama. We have to hear it to make sure it's radio worthy. You already refused the manager we tried to give you but in this you have to follow the rules."

Kazama placed his right hand on his sword hilt, his left still pinching his nose and said in a dangerously calm voice, "The song will be played this Saturday and it will be heard by _everyone_ for the first time that day. And whether I need you to run this pitiful company or not if you try to call me by what you Westerners would call my 'first name' ever again I will slice you into quarters. Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-y-y-yes Kazama, crystal." The CEO stuttered, keeping a very focused eye on the Oni's right hand.

"Good. Now stamp this envelope so we can go put it in the mail. Kaoru!" He snapped his finger and the youngest member gracefully walked over and placed an envelope onto the table gently. The CEO noticed the young man's hand on his weapon as well. "Kaoru bring that down and wait on the mailman. I want you to hand it to him."

"I'll have to _step_ down the stairs at this rate. That mail man will be here any minute." The boy whined.

"Then why are you still here?" Kazama barked. The boy disappeared immediately.

"That boy is an idiot, Kazama." Shiranui drawled, "Why did you bring him back?"

"Chizuru." Kazama muttered.

"Oh so you do like her? Bringing her brother back to life might not do the trick though, seeing as he tried to kill her and all."

"Don't be ridiculous. I was referring to her ability to resurrect all of the Shinsengumi like that. If I couldn't bring at least two then I would not be able to prove myself an appropriate mate." Kazama explained dryly, a look of scorn in his eyes. "How can you have feelings for someone you plan to use? Absurd."

"Yeah, yeah keep telling yourself that so you don't have to realize you lost to a human." The long purple haired Oni smirked. The CEO liked that one, though he had yet to learn his name. He and the red head didn't have any weapons.

Kazama's hand drew up, unsheathing his sword and letting it flash in the office lighting.

"Oh-ho you wanna go then?" The other Oni lifted his shirt to reveal two ancient looking pistols, one on each hip. The CEO ducked under the table with a screech. _They're all insane. _"I think he's scared."

"Running wild after your second _human friend," _Kazama spit the words out like an acrid taste in his mouth, "died has left you lacking in decorum. Did you forget you swore yourself to meâ€¦and why? Perhaps I should remind you with my sword."

"Kazama, Shiranui that is enough." The red head commanded. "There are innocent humans here."

"Amagiri," Kazama drawled, "are you presuming to command me? Or should I take that as a friendly suggestion?"

"Merely a suggestion Kazama." Amagiri bowed slightly at the waist.

"Good. Oh, Kaoru you're back." Kazama sheathed his weapon as the door opened. "Time to leave then, good day Mr. CEO."

The CEO didn't get out from under his desk until he heard the secretary bid the four Oni good bye.

"That song better be worth it." He muttered shakily.

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><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

Saturdayâ€¦again. It was the third week since the guys left, and the days were starting to blend. My Saturdays meant something with them around. Battle Night, a night of new music and good friends. They had become such good friends, or so I thought. I met them on a Saturday. They left on a Saturday.

It had been two days since Umarekawaru's song got added to the

rotation of the local rock station, and that damn song was all I heard about. It had gotten to the point where I refused to leave the house for fear of hearing complete strangers drone on and on about who it was written for and what it meant.

Shukke finally badgered me enough to get me out of the house. Well she threatened to let Cat in my room if I didn't unlock the door. Something about removing the hinges. Cat had been a disappointment to me. She was so happy and chipper after hearing their song, like she really expected them to apologize just because we showed up to a concert. It was a con. And the only thing that made me wonder was that the song seemed to piss Shukke off. She was definitely still up to something.

And so we had headed to Hot Topic at the Marketplace Mall this time. She seemed to understand my aversion to memories at the very least. I didn't think anything of it, till we got to the store and Shukke made a bee-line for the counter asking the staff to change the radio station.

"We don't play pop here." The tatted store clerk sneered as she asked for KISS 106.7.

"Trust me; I heard they are releasing the Oni Complex's debut single this week at eight o'clock, which means you should switch it likeâ€¦now." Shukke almost shouted as the guy made to walk away.

"The Oni Complex? That band that called the billboard when J-born was on, the ones who made that challenge?" He looked surprised at the information. "If you're telling the truth I will give you a free shirt. And I'll override the mall's speakers and play it through the whole joint. If they have the balls to challenge J-born they must be good." He switched the radio on and to the right station and then flipped a few switches and the perky voice of DJ White Saille floated through the building.

"_Hi and welcome back to the Billboard top 40 countdown. Two weeks ago Umarekawaru, also known as J-born, were issued a challenge by a band called the Oni Complex. This week we have the Oni Complex's debut single and a message saying that no one, not even the company that signed them, has heard this song yet. Let's give it a listen. This is 'Twisted Transistor."_

_Hey you, hey you devils little sister
>Listening to your twisted transistor
Hold it between your legs turn it up, turn it up
>Low end is coming through can't get enough

A lone-ly life where no one understands you
>But don't give up because the music do
>Music do!

_Because the music do
>And it is reaching inside you, forever preaching
F- you too

>Your scream's a whisper
Hang on you twisted transistor_

Hey you, hey you finally you get it
>The world ain't fair, eat you if you let it

>And as your tears fall on your breast, your dress

>Vibrations coming through you're in a mess

_Hey you, hey you this won't hurt a bit
>(This won't hurt a bit!
This won't hurt!)
>Says who says who? Anesthetize this b*tch
(Anesthetize this b*tch! Anesthetize!)
>Just let me be between you and me don't fit

And I just blocked out the rest of the song. Even after all that had happened I could not support the Oni Complex above Saito and his band.

Shukke, of course, noticed my blank expression and as the three of us walked out of Hot Topic ten minutes after the song ended she turned to me and asked in a super sweet voice, "So what did you think?"

"Well," I said cheekily. "We got some nice clothes for the selection available, I think Hot Topic is supporting a new look these days."

"Yeah," Cat joked, knowing what I was doing. "Skinny jeans and stripes. Just what we are looking for and all."

"I meant about the Oni Complex's song." Our tall friend prompted.

"Oh, right." I began, "I mean I didn't really pay attention to it. I know what you're trying to prove Shukke, and you're right. I just can't support the guys' rival band."

"I knew it!" Shukke did a little touchdown dance. "You still love him."

I remained silent until Cat accused me too. "Alright, I'll tell you." I admitted, shouting at them in the middle of the mall food court. "I love him, even though he's a murderous idiot who left me and didn't even let me say goodbye. Even though he never explained it and probably never will, denied me to the world and might never tell anyone elseâ€¦ I love him, because he promised with everything he had that he would come back, and he told me all the love songs he ever has or will write, will be for me. And I just have to believe him or I will go nuts."

Shukke just glomped me while Cat gave me a look. "Oh so that's what he told you that you kept to yourself." She snapped her fingers at me, "Girl you better realize that man loves you. 'Fore I hurt your stupid ass."

Shukke released me from her from behind hug as we arrived at the bus; which was still painted in Umarekawaru finery and once more we piled on, heading home. And I had to admit, after getting my feelings off my chest I felt lighter.

You better explain soon thoughâ€¦my personal miracle.

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Your Nickel Ain't Worth My Dime by Sleeping With Sirens (Umarekawaru's debut song)

Thrift Shop by Macklemore (The champion song on the radio)

Twisted Transistor by Korn (The Oni Complex's debut song)

21. Months Pass: The Concert

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 20<p>

~Months Pass; The Concert~

As we waited days turned into weeks and then weeks into months. The two bands competed hard core on the charts and the outcome varied minutely between them as to who was number one each week. Girls tended to like Umarekawaru while guys cheered more adamantly for The Oni Complex.

Nobody knew about Cat and me and it didn't seem like that would change anytime soon. We kept to our faith though, that the guys loved us and that they would come back. Cat and I still planned to go to their concert but there was never one nearby. Shukke still somehow always knew when Umarekawaru or the Oni Complex would be on the radio or T.V and force us to watch or listen, but it hadn't been as painful since I decided to believe in Hajime.

Me and Cat even each bought a copy of their album, We Live Again. I liked to think he was being honest when he told me all the love songs he wrote were for me and the album was full of them so I was happy. Finally a concert was booked here in Rochester at the Blue Cross Arena and with those love songs in mind I had agreed to follow through and buy a ticket with Shukke and Cat.

It was like the stars aligned when we went shopping at Marketplace Mall the day before because Hot Topic had just the right outfit in my size.

So resplendent in my halter corset dress with a tutu like skirt the color of Hajime's eyes and thick black swirls through the fabric and a white cord tying my hair in a high ponytail, I waited in traffic with Cat and Shukke a block away from the arena. Shukke was driving so there was a lot of horn blaring and swearing, but she smiled the whole time like a bi polar Tourette's patient. Her smile seemed a bit forced but considering all the traffic and stop and go I didn't blame her.

Parking was always difficult in the lunchbox on wheels, something about parking garages just didn't agree with it you know, so we

borrowed my sister's car for the concert. Parking _it_ was much easier. Easier than getting her to loan it to us in any case.

Everything seemed to be going right though. I would finally see them again. I would finally see _him_ again. We were walking towards the big glass doors that marked the front entrance to the Arena when Shukke grabbed me and Cat by the arms and dragged us to the back door.

Confused I saw her flash something from her coat pocket at the security guard outside the smaller entrance and he calmly stepped aside allowing us into the small atrium with a couple dozen girls crowded along the walls. They had formed a line and were getting a meet and greet with the guys before the show.

Cat and I joined the line thinking there wasn't much else we could do while Shukke stood against the wall to wait. The line moved slowly but eventually we were next. I had a bad feeling though when I noticed none of the Shinsengumi were even glancing at us. Sannan had caught my eye once and there was something decidedly sad about the way he nodded in greeting. He had not looked at me since.

As we got to the table the band members all stood, rather mechanically, and began to walk away.

"Wait!" I cried, thinking it was just a bad dream. It might have been my imagination but Hajime looked like he stopped and almost turned around before he called, his back still to us, "Sorry miss, sound check."

"But Hajime!" I called, while Cat called out to Souji. But they just kept walking. I stood in shock for a moment, but soon they were all gone, except Sannan who turned and looked at me and an equally distraught Cat with pity. "Sannan-san." I took a few steps towards him but he just raised a hand to stop me.

I was pissed. All that hope over the past few months had been false. All the love I felt for Hajime, a love strong enough to have its own life, turned black. Reaching down to my belt loop I pulled the ever present katana, sheathe and all and made to hand it to him.

Taking it, the bespectacled rock star asked, "Do you want me to tell him anything?" As he looked around, careful to be quiet enough so that other girls could not hear.

"It should be message enough." I told him. He looked to Cat to see if she would be returning her borrowed katana to Souji.

"Tell him I am keeping it, but only so I can use it to decapitate him next time I see him." She said, sounding as pissed as I felt at the physical betrayal. It was like my worst nightmare come to life when he called me 'miss' and walked away without even looking at me.

_They won't have a choice but to explain, since they love us. _Cat had said that months ago when this plan was hatched. And all I could think was that I guessed it meant they didn't love us. Cat must have been feeling it too.

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

It was definitely one of the more difficult things Hajime had ever had to do; sitting there knowing Ryane was in the room but being unable to run over and embrace her. To have her so close, but so unattainableâ€¦it surely must have been a punishment for all his sins. Or at least that's what it felt like.

She and Cat had approached the bench and Shinpachi and Harada stood up at that moment, an imperceptible second before the rest of the band, and made for the door leading to sound check. No matter how much it hurt to think that way, Hajime and Souji had both been incredibly grateful for that excuse. How could they treat those two girls like any other fan? Even with their manager hovering at the end of the bench, waiting for a slip up.

It was only when they were all on the other side of that door that the two men felt the absence of Shukke's death glare bouncing off their backs.

Souji plastered a half-hearted smirk on his face and walked beside his best friend to a nearby food table. Safely out of earshot he muttered, "I'll be damned if we ever do that again."

"It was good to see that they were well when they arrived though." Hajime said quietly. "I don't think they will be all right now, unfortunately."

"They seemed pretty happy to see us too. I bet given time they'll forgive us again, right?" Souji said with a bit more joy then he felt.

"I'm afraid I have to disagree." Sannan interrupted after walking up behind them quietly. In his hand was a familiar short sword that made Hajime blanch. "She didn't have a message for the action." He told Hajime with a carefully emotionless voice and blank face. "She said you would know what it means."

"And Cat?" Souji asked, his mouth dropping the smirk that was usually present.

"She said she was keeping yours so she could use it to decapitate you next time she saw you." Sannan reported, still emotionless. "She seemed serious."

Hajime reached out and grabbed the sword that meant more as an extension of the girl he loved than it had ever meant as his own weapon; his eyes holding a pain that Souji could not quite identify with words, but felt just as keenly as he mulled over Cat's words.

Hijikata saw those eyes and Souji's as well and walked over as Hajime slid the sword into his belt. Taking in the sword and both men's stricken expressions he said, without looking at either band mate, "The show must go on."

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point Of View:<p>

The ride home seemed longer than it was without the sword that had been a reminder of his love next to me at all times. Even if the reminder was a lie, I missed its solid presence. But I knew now, Hajime would not be coming back. _I need to stop calling him Hajime now,_ I realized. And that realization was what sent me over the edge into tears.

Cat and I were in the back of my sister's car and Shukke was driving again. Shukke didn't have that fake smile forced onto her face anymore, and it hit me like a ton of bricks that she knew this was going to happen, had set up that meet and greet pass knowing we would be in heartache now.

"How much more do you know Shukke? What was the point of this?" I asked sharply through the tears.

"Would you have listened if I told you the concert was a bad idea?" At least she had the decency to sound aggrieved. "I told you before I cannot tell you why things are happening how they are. Against better judgment I gave my word. Things are much better off even now to how they could be."

"What does that even mean?" Cat grated through grinding teeth. "Let me guess, you can't say."

Shukke just sat tight lipped in the driver's seat.

I couldn't take it anymore. "Stop the car!" It was more of an order then a request at this point even though we were still several miles away from our house.

As Shukke complied, Cat tried to be the voice of reason. "We are on the high way, Ryane. Just relax and when we get homeâ€¦"

"I don't feel like going home right now. Between her lying about everything and you acting like everything is going to be okay, I just can't be around that. Not right now." My voice sounded harsh, but I didn't feel bad about that.

"Oh, so you're breaking up with us too, huh?" Cat yelled. I knew she was mad, she had a right to be, but I didn't really think on it enough to care. All I could feel was that emptiness at my hip. "You know what? Fine! We can be a family without you anyway. We don't need you if you don't need us!"

And to her tirade I got out of the car on the 490 interstate and slammed my sister's car's door in a way that would have been impossible in the bus. It was satisfying to do, and I wondered if Shukke had planned this out to. I didn't get the chance to ask because as I shut the car door she floored it back to the house. I did the only thing I could think to do that would actually get me somewhere and pulled out my phone to call a friend.

* * *

><p>Stacy's Point of View:<p>

There are a few things in life that you don't expect to ever happen.

One of those things for me was to have a good friend in the form of Ryane Bell call in tears asking for a place to stay. I thought those three would stick it out through thick and thin and always maintain their sisterhood. It reminded me of the bet I had going though and as I sighed, internally at any rate, I grabbed my car keys pausing to glare at the bass I would now have to practice. I had lost the bet after all.

I hated highway driving. There was too much going on and being in a little convertible purple punchbug, even though the car was really cute with silver butterflies painted on it, made me feel like one wrong move would find me squished under a semi. But it was for Ryane so I mustered up my courage and turned onto the highway I didn't want to be on.

Of course, I could have asked my friend to walk to the nearest exit ramp and as I pulled up next to her I stared dumbfounded at the ramp about fifty feet away. Yeah she was impossible. But then I caught a look at her in her cute Hot Topic dress which she had the skirt of fisted in her hands, smudged black eye shadow and lipstick that matched her blue dress and thought, _I am being selfish, _even though most people would disagree, because Ryane looked distraught.

Heartache is a terrible thing. I didn't have a concrete plan on how to help my ailing friend but I figured the first step was to get her into my little bug and go from there.

She didn't need much prompting and, indeed, upon seeing the car she slouched over and jumped in. "If you ask me, 'how are you?' I might have to resort to violence." Her joke came out rough and mechanical and her voice was just as lost as her appearance.

It wasn't that I was speechless, necessarily. I just had nothing appropriate to say that would not upset her. Everything either brought up what was wrong or was a really stupid question that was best left unasked. Things akin to how are you and the like. So in the end I stared dully at her for a minute or so and then told her to "buckle up for safety!" Which at least got a somewhat normal reaction out of her as she rolled her eyes.

I enjoyed driving in my beetle, it lifted my spirits, and I could see a small smile, similar to the one Hajime Saito had flashed at that Christmas party so many months ago, emerge on my new roommate's face every time we passed a car where someone invoked the 'punchbug purple, no punch back!' rule and slammed a friend or family member with their fist. Of course it would be ill advised to tell Ryane she was smiling like the man who had broken her heart so I let that slide. While not as violent as Cat, Ryane was in a certain state of mind the required delicate handling.

The ride to my house was quiet. I think that she was expecting me to ask what happened, but due to the bet I already knew. The person I bet against had warned me against acting like I knew the situation though, and while I was normally adverse to lying, that person had sent me pictures of bruises that I didn't want to receive. I would have to play the fool, because I knew that person's plan, and I agreed that while the method of the plan was wrong in many ways, it might be the only way to bring about the happy ending that that person so desperately wanted.

And it all started with a bet a handful of days after Christmas.

The phone was ringing...and ringingâ€¦and ringing. I just wanted to stay in bed but that incessant ringing was driving me nuts. Something told me this call would change my life. It was a weak feeling in the pit of my stomach but it was there as I looked at the caller id and saw Shukke displayed in proud yet digital letters.

"_Hello," I answered dully._

"_Hey, Stacyâ€¦ I got a bet for you." Shukke sounded her way to chipper for seven in the morning on a Saturday self, but aside from that, I was curious. Iâ€¦_

"STACY!" The car jerked to the right as Ryane grabbed the steering wheel and pulled. "That was a red light you idiot! Where is your head? We almost died!"

"Sorryâ€¦" I offered softly, stunned at the close call Ryane had scraped us through by weaving through the oncoming traffic.

"Sorry, she saysâ€¦ you're lucky this car is so small or we would have been hit." But her face fell from angry to sad as she said this, and I could only imagine the memory she was having of a much bigger vehicle full of her friends and some rockers who had left them for greener pastures.

"Ryane," I began. But I stopped, it was time to decide if I tell her the truth and Shukke's crazy plan, or if I act like I know nothing and play into said crazy plan. She decided it for me though.

"It was all a part of Shukke's plan, whatever that is. I think it's to make us miserable. She knew they would act like that though, like they never knew us. She knew and she took us backstage somehow and gave them the opportunity to hurt us. She has been up to something this whole time. And I don't even know if it's over, but if it isn't it better be a good ending."

"It's not over." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "And the happy ending only comes through the secrecy of the plan. She's gonna kill me for telling you even this little bit, butâ€¦ It's not the guy's fault. It's their management. And the only way to fight it is to get even. That's more than I should have said. But it's certainly enough to figure some of it out."

Ryane sat in thought for a long time and then said, "Plan B huh?"

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

"How much did you tell her?" I was trying to remain calm while on the phone with Stacy, really I was, but I could feel my anger slowly coming forward into plain sight as she told me exactly how much she had revealed to Ryane. "Is she still mad at me?" I asked, but somehow I knew the answer before she said it. Ryane would have called me herself if she were not. As sad as the fact was, her being angry with me was a good thing. It meant most of her negative emotions were

centered on me, which meant she was not focusing them on Saito.

"Shukke, what's going on?" Cat stood outside my door, which I forgot to close to take this call. It was all for the best I guess; Cat had the right to know everything Ryane knew about the situation. I would have to tell herâ€¦ without giving more away.

"Thanks for telling me Stacy," I said into my phone while holding up one finger to silence Cat. "Keep me posted." And I hung up.

"What's Stacy got to do with anything?" Cat asked, suspicious. Well I deserved that I suppose.

"Ryane is staying with her for now." I answered, shocking her with the fact that I was open with any information. I deserved that too.

"Well we have to go get her!" Cat shouted. I knew she was upset that our little family was broken, but I had other plans.

"We can't." Again she was shocked that I was actually talking about something like I had a plan. "She needs to stay with Stacy for a while."

"What?! Why?" She wasn't going to make this easy on me.

"Because it's a part of my plan." There I admitted it. This was going to be difficult.

Several hours and many partially unintentional slips later Cat smacked me on the back of the head with an open palm and declared, "You should have just said so in the first place, God!"

I smiled meekly at her and waited to see if she said anything else. When she spoke next she surprised the hell out of me. "I don't think Ryane should know too much of the plan right now though, or she would never go through with it. She and Saito deserve happiness and I agree this will get them the results they need, but she needs to be in the dark because lord knows she is stupid stubborn."

I had honestly expected a more emotional and therefore less logical response from her. I thought she would hit me and demand to know the full plan and that I tell our friend immediately. But Cat seemed to take the bulk of what I told her, which was about half the plan by the time she was done questioning, and process it into the concrete belief that I was right. I was shocked.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you for drugging us or anything. Please believe something bad is coming to you, but I guess it can wait." She informed me relentlessly, causing no small amount of fear to creep up my spine. Her giant smile belied her angry words though and I had to think that maybe I had gotten a bit of redemption in the face of at least one of my friends. I knew I wasn't completely forgiven, that would take time, but at least for nowâ€¦this was enough.

22. Lollipop Revisited: Shukke's Plan

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 21<p>

~Lollipop Revisited; Shukke's Plan~

Oh my God. Living with Stacy was a dream come true. If that dream were a freaking nightmare! I mean she's my friend and we were close but OCD much? I took off a pair of pants and as per usual left them on the floor to take care of on laundry day and she _flipped. _Rooms are made to be lived in. That was my motto when it came to cleanliness. I swear it just made me want to move all the furniture in the house five inches to the left just to see what she would turn in to. On second thought she would probably kick me out or, worse, kill me.

I hadn't heard anything from the girls. Shukke seemed to be in contact with Stacy though, because she always changed the channel to some Umarekawaru interview or a music video by the Oni Complex on the occasions that I watched T.V. I hated to admit it, but in their video for the song they debuted with, Kazama looked pretty damn sexy when he was tearing up that hotel room. He was even using his true Oni form though everyone who hadn't seen the anime, which was a dwindling number, probably thought it was just cool effects and those who had seen the show thought it was a decent gimmick.

The truth of that matter is that no one really knew what to make of the similarities between the two bands and the characters of that anime. There were people who really believed that the members of Umarekawaru and the Oni Complex were ancient samurai and demons, there weren't many but there were some. Then there was an even smaller group that thought it was a coincidence and that there was no connection. Finally, the largest group of fans and all the people who disliked both bands thought it was a gimmick. Some people who thought it was all for a show thought it was cool, a lot thought it was lame.

The media had been issued a blanket rule that they could not ask either band about it and neither group had said anything to confirm or deny the rumors of their own accord. The only indicators that there might be any truth to these rumors was that in the beginning Kazama had insisted on calling Hijikata by the Oni name he had bequeathed him.

In fact the rumors started when a fan looked up the word Hakuouki and found the anime. Watching it, he had been shocked and spread the word to his friends who then also told their friends. Soon it was on social media sites across the globe.

Knowing the truth was hard because sometimes I just wanted to post it to a forum and wait for the shit storm. But if Saito and the others were not informing the public of what had happened to them, far be it my place to do so for them.

One more secret in their closet. One more lie they will spread through not speaking. 'An omission is the commission of a lie.' My

mother told me that often as I grew up.

Stacy had informed me that the Shinsengumi were denying us per the management of their record label. Something about rules or whatever. A part of me wanted to understand that they were being forcedâ€¦ that they would have said something if they could. But then I would remember that I had been drugged so I couldn't say goodbye. That he hadn't explained anything. That he didn't trust me to understand that this was goodbye.

But he had left behind his sword. A precious link to his past, a part of him, had been left in my care. The contradictions and mixed messages made my head spin whenever I thought of them, so like with most complex situations that confused or irritated me, I didn't pay it any attention. I just locked it up in the corner of my mind behind boxes and boxes of things I didn't want to deal with. I would hide it there, along with the love I still felt for him.

It was weird. I had been around him for what? Three months? How could he have such a profound impact on me almost half a year later? How could I still love him? We had never even gone on a dateâ€¦ what was wrong with me?

The answer mercilessly popped into my head. _He's not like anyone I have ever metâ€¦nor will I likely meet anyone like him again._ Everything about him attracted me, whether it be how controlled he was with his sword to how expressive he could be in silence. One look could sketch a picture worth four thousand words. He was gentle, but due to his life he was not soft. He was passionate but had his limits.

I remembered the week we had cuddled every night, the week before he left, he had kept his hands to himselfâ€¦ or at least to some extent. One night his hands had drifted but he immediately corrected himself. I had pouted but before I could complain he had explained in that soft spoken way of his.

"_There are some things you cannot take back. Let us stay the way we are just a little longer."_

Of course now it occurred to me that he hadn't done anything because he knew he would be leaving soon, but that restraint was still there. To be honest it marked him as different even more so. A modern guy would have taken what he could for the simple fact that he wouldn't have to deal with repercussions.

I think even beyond that it was my own thoughts that lead to this clinging feeling. I had labeled him as my own personal miracle. I felt it fate that I had seen them appear at the mall before anyone else, that I had saved them from the bevy of girls. But thenâ€¦ maybe fate was cruel. Because as surely as it had brought me into their livesâ€¦ if that were true, it brought Shukke to them as well to buy the instruments they played. If she hadn't done that they would not have left. Of course, I told myself, it would have been impossible for her to predict this outcome.

I wanted to have faith in my friend.

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

"She is going to kill him." I said that bluntly and in an almost deadpan voice.

"Look we all talked about it," Shinpachi was saying through a rare phone call, most of our conversations were through texting. "And the only way he can act naturally about this is if the girl looks like her. He was reluctant too, but as Hijikata says, the show must go on. He's gonna have to kiss _someone_ for the video and unless he wants to make it look like it's a chore the girl has got to look like Ryane. Well, sorta anyway."

"Sorta?" I have to admit that part confused me.

"To be frank if the video girl looks too much like her he might lose control. So we are thinking same height to weight proportions but different hair and eyes." The drummer explained in a flustered manner.

"I see," I did understand, but I was still thinking about Ryane's reaction to the video I would have to make Stacy play for her. It was one of the moments I had had since this plan formed that made me doubt that I was doing a good thing. But, unlike what Stacy assumed, this plan was not just to get the girls back with Okita and Saito. I wanted to show these girls and all they could do to the world. Cat's personality and humor. Stacy's gentleness and hope. Ryane's perseverance and her attitude.

I cherished these girls. The last thing I wanted was for them to cry. I know in the end I really should be punished severely for putting them through all this, but this catalyst for changeâ€¦I couldn't let it be.

"Make sure he doesn't lose himself." I reminded Shinpachi, "Ryane will see it." Hanging up I turned around to see Cat standing in my doorway with an annoyed expression on her face.

"Still up to no good huh, Shukke?" She asked with a sour look on her face. I was about to lie to her and cover up this latest development but I knew Cat. She would figure it out all too soon and I would get another beat down. To avoid that I told her the truth.

"I was talking to Shinpachi," her eyes nearly bugged out of her head as I admitted to the treason. "They are doing a video for their rendition of Lollipop and, well, Saito has to kiss a video girl in one of the scenes."

"We have to tell Ryane not to watch it!" It was proof of her friendship that only after that exclamation Cat added, "Wait a minuteâ€¦ What about Souji?"

"He is going to be playing strip poker with some girls and other people in the band. I believe the plan is to have them in their underwear." Cat's teeth gnashed at this and I could almost feel her agitation rolling off her in waves. "He won't be kissing anyone though." I assured her before continuing cautiously. "And Ryane needs to watch it."

"What?!" She exploded. "You _know_ how much that is going to hurt

her."

"Not nearly as much as receiving that sword back hurt him," I mumbled inaudibly. Getting louder I answered, "She needs to realize a few things and watching that video might be the only way."

"What are you leaving out?" Her question oozed suspicion.

"In order for Saito toâ€¦preformâ€¦ well enough for the camera the girl they are choosing will have a lot of characteristics, physically, that Ryane has. I believe her height and weight will be the same, though Shinpachi said her coloring would be a little different." The explanation was rushed and I almost cringed at the end, waiting for Cat to wallop me. She surprised me though by laughing instead.

"That's kinda pathetic on his part. Unable to kiss a girl properly that doesn't look and feel like the one he gave up, heh." Cat thought for a moment and came to the conclusion I hoped Ryane would reach after watching the video. "He still loves her doesn't he?"

"He will keep his promise." I assured her, "Even though she gave up, he will not."

"I don't think she permanently gave up, just kinda took a break. When your plan starts moving it will all be ok." She gave me a quizzical look before asking, "Can't you just tell me what this plan of yours is? The whole thing, mind you."

"You would tell her, and she wouldn't agree to any of it if she knew it was what I was aiming for." I said trying to act calm. Really Cat still scared me after that painful beat down that I had deserved wholeheartedly and living with just me and her in this house I tried to avoid situations that would lead back to her getting that angry again.

"You said you wanted us to be on equal footing as them." She muttered, thinking, putting two and two together. "And it's something Ryane would not agree to. Equalâ€¦equalâ€¦ their management won't let them date people who are not famousâ€¦Oh my god." She looked at me first in surprise and then with a complex mix of shock and excitement. "What instrument am I supposed to play? Stacy plays bass right? So drums or guitarâ€¦"

"I thought you would like guitar, so I have been learning drums." I admitted hesitantly. I wondered if she would have an issue playing the same instrument as Souji but she just beamed at me. Her smile fell after a moment though and she moaned in frustration.

"She will never agree to this. And Stacy stopped playing her bass years ago."

I felt like I could explain everything to Cat at that moment because she wanted this too now. "That is where the plan comes in. The day the guys learned of the Ten Ugly Battles I came up with this plan to bring you girls to the center stage. To share you with the world. I knew most record companies would frown on their acts dating a non-celebrity so I decided all along that I needed to bet Stacy that Ryane would run and cry to her for a place to stay. The price should she loseâ€¦which I intended her to do, was that she had to practice

her bass and get ready for the band while keeping it a secret from Ryane.

"The first goal was to get them signed. The second was to get Ryane so mad at me she moved to Stacy's. That is as far as the plan went until I noticed Saito and Ryane together and then how she was so miserable apart from him. So the third goal was to make her realize how much she wanted to be back in his life as an equal, so much so that she would get over her stage fright and sing again. And finally the fourth goal was to sail through the charts and give them a run for their money."

Cat looked at me in awe. "You planned all along to make her angry at you. Ryane's anger, my angerâ€¦you masochist!"

"Yeah, wellâ€¦" I agreed softly. "The only person who knew the whole plan was Will." I felt my heart falter at the memory of that conversation. It had almost broke my will.

"Was? You say it in past tense. Speaking of Will you haven't talked to him in a long timeâ€¦that obnoxious ring tone you gave himâ€¦" Cat picked up on my sorrow then and came to the proper conclusion. "Record companies won't generally let their acts date non-celebrities. You and Willâ€¦you broke it off for this?"

"He argued that it was not important; that our love was of more value than yours and Okita's or Ryane's and Saito's. I just couldn't agree with that. I hate to sound selfish but that was the hardest part of the plan. Originally I was going to be a manager of sorts so that I could have my happy ending too. But because of his attitude towards this I decided to play the drums. Shinpachi taught me a bit before they left and I have been practicing since then."

"Oho Shinpachi huh?" Cat asked with a sly look in her eye.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked trying not to be as flustered as I felt.

"Nothing, nothing." She waved her hand in her face to dissolve the conversation. "So about this video?"

After hearing about the video and what Ryane was supposed to get out of it, Cat decided that everyone should be on board and there should be no more secrets. "You know, Shukkeâ€¦If you just tell herâ€¦"

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

They were on the set of the music video listening to the general hubbub of the video actors when a girl that could have been Ryane's twin walked on with bright pink hair and eyes so dark they looked black. Saito gave her a discreet once over before shaking her hand, but she seemed to notice.

"Like what you see?" She flirted.

"You remind me of someone," he answered with a faint smile.

"You know, all the girls auditioning were my size. Is this, like,

your type?" She asked coyly.

"To be honest I prefer taller girls, but like I said, you remind me of someone."

"So it's true." She supposed quietly. "There is a rumor that you have a girlfriend, or at least someone you love."

"There are things I can't go into," Saito said by way of acknowledgement.

"Your secret is safe with me." The girl said with a nod. She then smiled at Saito's conflicted expression and held out her hand. "My name is Rena Jay."

"Hajime Saito, I hope we work well together." Rena beamed at him before places were called and she moved to lean against the banister trailing up the stairs behind her, a drink in her hand.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

I was watching T.V when Stacy plopped onto the couch next to me and put her feet over my legs. She then grabbed the remote and changed the channel to MTV. The sound of a tour bus rumbled through the speakers and I got a bad feeling as I watched the panorama of partiers. At one point Sannan was on the screen, a girl tracing a circle on his t-shirted chest while a second one stroked his chin.

"Whoa, bottoms up!" The picture focused on Okita as he slammed back what I was guessing was a glass of sake. He was sitting at a table with Heisuke, Hijikata, and three beautiful women. "The game is five card draw, deuces are wildsâ€¦deuces are twos ladies." He explained with a laugh. "So it's guys on girls, first ones to full frontal lose, which leaves you ladies to an advantage. Now that's saidâ€¦.ante up." And he took off a shoe and put it on the table.

The screen then panned over to Saito, wearing thick square framed glasses by the entrance and the pretty girl who looked like me with pink hair. They seemed to be in a conversation, which was interrupted when Shinpachi and Harada boisterously entered the house with a young looking girl between them.

The two drummers made asses of themselves before walking away as Saito called out "I was so worried someone wouldn't invite you cool guys. That girl better be eighteen!" Turning back to the girl, who had almost black eyes they were so dark, he continued. "My friends, they're idiots."

"Are you kidding I love your friends. I'm glad they got to come." The girl said with a laugh as Saito shook his head. "I'm glad you came," she offered sweetly before biting her lip. Then the scene panned to the strip poker table again.

The boys just lost the first hand and took off their shirts, revealing toned six packs and chests riddled with scars from swords. The scene then went back to Saito and the girl who looked like me and

they had more conversation about the house being her vacation home and how things got 'monotonous'.

"Are you bored right now?" Saito asked in a flirtatious manner. The opening to their version of lollipop was playing in the background.

"No." The girl answered.

"No?" Saito prompted.

To which the girl replied, "Maybe a little."

_She said he so sweet
>I wanna lick the wrapper.

As he began to sing the screen captured the whole band with their instruments outside playing in front of the house. Saito was not wearing the glasses anymore and had on a button down shirt completely open. Then it went back to Saito and the look a like walking outside before showing the whole band rocking out and then the strip poker table. It looked like the boys won a hand because the three girls playing the card game took off their shirts while Hijikata smirked, Souji clapped his hands once and Heisuke looked bug eyed.

The song still playing told me this was a music video, but I stopped caring when the girl showed up again and stripped to her underwear and got into the pool giving a come hither look before beckoning to him with one finger. Saito threw the glasses that were once again on his face aside and began hopping on one foot to pull off his sneaker. He then took off his shirt and began to remove his pants before the scene went back to the poker table where the boys lost another round. They too removed their pants.

_Won't you get on your knees?
>Won't you get on your knees?

The screen went to Sannan being led into a bedroom by the two girls pressed against him in the beginning of the video while the poker playing boys won another hand making the girls take off their tiny skirts.

Then the shot went back to Saito getting into the water with that look alike while the song played

_Call me so I can
>Come and do it for you
Call me so I can
>Come and prove it for you
Call me so I can
>Make it juicy for you
Call me so I can
>Get it juicy.

And then all I could hear was my own shriek as Saito kissed the video girl. No, not just kissing that was full blown making out, like he missed her with all his soul and needed her. That was a kiss that spoke of a longing so deep it was painful. Stacy paused the video with TiVo and I saw there, for one screen, his two swords side by side next to his pants crossed at the hilts.

A pain at seeing those two swords together blossomed in my chest and I cried out again before she pushed play and I saw Saito look the

girl in the eye like he did me. And I don't know if it was on purpose or if somehow someone had gotten into the videos effects and was playing a prank but his eyes reflected the girl and in that reflection she had black hair and forest green eyes.

The girl was unhooking her bra when Sannan came barreling out of the house handcuffed and in his boxers with a couple girls _whipping_ him from behind. He jumped into the water which caused the whole party to do the same, so Saito shrugged and went back to kissing the girl he picked for the video to remind him of me.

He still loves me. I couldn't help but think that as I thought about the likenesses between me and the video girl and the seconds of footage of the swords and the reflection in his eye.

"Do you understand now?" Shukke's voice at the door asked me, stern but concerned.

"Is this a part of your plan too?" I asked annoyed at the sob hiding in my voice. Stacy got up and walked away to avoid the shit storm that might follow Shukke's next words.

"The love he feels for you exceeds the expectations of the plan. It was never a part of the plan for you two to fall in love." Her voice still held that concern but was softer, more contained.

Her admission shocked me, but taking the initiative I asked, "What is the point of the plan then? I thought it was to reunite us."

"It's nothing as selfless as that." Cat said from behind Shukke. Popping her head out she continued, "It took a lot of persuading to get her to tell you anything about Plan B. She doesn't think you will cooperate without incentive. Saito is that incentive."

"What are youâ€¦" A part of me didn't want to know but I squashed it down into the depths of my soul.

"We are going to be their equals." Shukke admitted like she was being tortured. "With Stacy on bass, me on drums, Cat on guitar and your voice leading us onto the stage we can do it."

"I can't." It was an automatic response based on my fear of being judged by any and everyone who heard me.

"Does he mean so little to you?" Shukke dared to ask.

"How would we get famous?" I asked to change the subject. "It's not like there are talent scouts all over Rochester."

"There is going to be a battleâ€¦nationwide. Like American Idol for bands. We just have to practice and learn and then when the time comes submit our voices." Shukke explained like it was easy. "You sang with Saito once on stage in the light. So sing for him this time."

"What are we calling ourselves?" I asked to agree with the plan much to Shukke's shock and Cat's surprise.

"Plan B." Shukke said after a moment.

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Lollipop by Framing Hanley (Video concept and song used by Umarekawaru)

23. Stacy's New Reason: Liar

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 22<p>

~Stacy's New Reason; Liar~

That grin was creepy. It was the grin that said she was up to no goodâ€¦Again.

"Shukke?" I began. She had been more open with her plan for about a day but once she bought us instruments and we started practicing making music the tallest of my friends had stopped answering questions.

"If you have time to ask questions you have time to write better lyrics." Shukke interrupted me. That's right, I had lyrics to write, the others were counting on meâ€¦I had toâ€¦._Hey wait a damn minute!_

"Ninja mind trick!" I cried out, she was getting crafty.

"I think it's time Stacy met the members of Umarekawaru." Shukke announced to the room.

"I met them at the partyâ€¦" Stacy reminded the Amazonian warily but Shukke continued on like she didn't hear the protest.

"They are having a release party of sorts for their next single on Halloween. It will be a costume masquerade. Women don't have any requirements other than the mask, but men have to wear swords." Shukke explained matter of factly.

"Well what are we wearing?" Cat asked, clearly thinking we were all expected to go.

"We nothing! Stacy is the only one going. The rest of us will practice."

"I don't have a costume." Stacy bemoaned.

"I got one for you," Shukke admitted happily. "You like butterflies right?"

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

"Hakuoukiâ€¦" Kazama mumbled as he thought about God knows what. He had been like that since back in the Bakumatsu and even Shiranui, who sat across from him on the tour bus polishing his guitar, couldn't fathom how the Oni vocalist could obsess so thoroughly over a _human_. It wasn't healthy.

"Shouldn't we be trying to ruin them about now?" The guitarist questioned sounding a bit peevish.

"How do you propose we do that?" Kazama snapped at the gun wielder.

"Hold a press conference and explain how they are the Shinsengumi?" Kaoru offered hesitantly.

"That would lead to people either thinking we are crazy or trying to feed into the gimmick." Amagiri explained with a sigh.

"What if we true formed or something during the middle of it?" The youngest Oni kept trying.

"They would suspect special effects." Kazama sneered. "I have a plan for when we get back from this last concert. Chizuru is what? Sixteen? That is under this place's age of consent or whatever that stupid law is right?"

"Are you gonna snap a picture of her and Hijikata?" Shiranui asked, smiling gleefully until Kazama snarled. "I mean Hakuoukiâ€¦" He corrected casually.

"I still don't understand what possessed you to give him an Oni name," Kaoru grumbled.

"It's cause he kept losing to Hakuouki," the purple haired Oni remarked flippantly which, of course, caused the blonde to level the Douji-giri a hairsbreadth away from his neck. Shiranui didn't even blink as Kazama angled the blade ever so slightly towards his tanner flesh. "Touchy subject?" He goaded.

"Enough Shiranui!" Amagiri commanded in a quiet tone.

"It's because he lived like an Oni should." Kazama said in a steely voice. "I acknowledged his life. That is all."

"Humph. I still say it's cause you didn't want to admitâ€¦" Shiranui began, his hands creeping to one of the guns under his shirt.

"Enough!" Amagiri commanded again, getting louder while his hand darted out, grabbing and slowly crushing the gun man's wrist, stopping it from inching towards his weapon.

"You take all the fun out of it." Shiranui griped before _stepping _sideways to the empty seat next to where he was seated, away from the Douji-giri Yasutsuna.

Kazama sheathed the legendary sword and sat back down across from the least submissive of his band mates. Amagiri was next to the blonde

and Kaoru had edged over to the sleeping area when the argument began, his soft, rhythmic breathing coupled by the skipping, uneven beat of his heart confirmed that he was pretending to sleep.

A few hours passed in silence before a rustling sound could be heard from the sleeping area as Kaoru pulled out his keyboard and played an abstract little melody. _Dun dun dun dundundun._

"Kaoru," Kazama snapped, "Play that again!"

"It's just something I have been working on, sorry was I too loud?" Kaoru stammered.

"You have other instruments figured out?" Kazama asked in a harsh tone.

"And lyricsâ€¦I just didn't know ifâ€¦" Kaoru sounded scared.

"Bring it out here." Kazama ordered with a snap of his long calloused fingers.

"It's not something you would want to sing, Kazama-sama." The youngest Oni tried to avoid coming out, but Kazama just snapped his fingers again and the boy darted out with several sheets of paper.

"I will decide that. It's more if the fans listening would like it rather than if I would." Kazama muttered the last part more to himself, but the Oni all heard him as he passed the sheets to their respective players after a cursory glance. "We will play it next week."

Kaoru beamed happily until Shiranui and Kazama both smacked him as Kazama advised "Don't get cocky."

* * *

><p>Stacy's Point of View:<p>

The party Shukke was forcing me to go to was less than a week away and she still, though not through lack of trying on my part, wouldn't let me see the costume she had prepared for me. As much as I loved butterflies I didn't want to go as an oversized bug.

I didn't even know why Shukke was sending me to this thing. It wasn't part of the plan she had laid out for me. Was I supposed to contact someone important for our careers? No, that didn't make sense; she was planning on the nationwide battle. She said it was to meet Umarekawaru but everyone would be in costume and masked. She was up to something, and now I knew how it felt to be reluctantly on the receiving end.

Ryane was still working on lyrics for her fourth song. Apparently they didn't come as easily to her as they did her match. His name was Saitoâ€¦right? Who knows? I had tried to sidle over and help with the poems she would be making into our songs but Shukke had noticed and grabbed me by the ear and steered me away with a firm "Let her do it."

I didn't know what she was thinking, but I was itching to do

something to help. "Why won't you let me help her?" I asked the mastermind as we prepared some lunch instead. The kitchen was Shukke's domain, so demanding answers in it was like getting answers as a detainee in a prison camp. It definitely didn't happen.

But the chick was full of surprises.

"Have you ever been in love?" She answered with a question of her own.

"What? Of course," I replied, thinking of the few guys I had loved so far.

"Would you call any of them your soul mate? Would you love them even if they put you through something like, say, Saito did to Ryane or Okita did to Cat?" She looked over at me and I flinched at the pure emotion in her eyes. "Would you die for them if you thought it meant you could live in their world again?"

"They knew each other for three months." I muttered annoyed at this dramatic display that was so not Shukke.

"Did she not tell you who they were? Who they really were?" Shukke's intense gaze shifted to the door where Ryane now stood looking dazed. "Ryane, that's not fair."

"Who would believe the truth?" She asked Shukke with a twitch going in her cheek at being called unfair.

"You mean that stupid gimmick?" I scoffed. They were gonna tell me that shit was real? Yeah right.

"It's _not_ a stupid gimmick," Ryane shouted all of a sudden. "It's real."

She explained everything to me then. How the guys appeared, how she saved them from admirers and a burly man's certain death, how they came to live with her and the girls. How Shukke bought them instruments and the way she got kicked from her guild on WoW the night of the first battle for not logging on enough. How Okita and Saito taught her and Cat swordsmanship and about Comatose. She told me everything and she couldn't help but cry at the end as she gave the sword back to the man she couldn't help but call Hajime at that point.

I had to find somewhere to sit as I muttered "Dear Godâ€¦the gimmick is real?" Shukke nodded and I couldn't help but speak my mind. "Then they-they're monsters!"

Ryane must not have been expecting that because her head snapped up in shock at my words. "What did you say?" She snarled.

"I saw that anime when I heard the rumorâ€¦They are murderers, monsters. And they all died. What abominations, coming back to life like that!" But the shock was running its course and before Ryane had time to move I continued. "Or are they miracles?" I gripped my head in confusion.

"Well," Shukke said in answer. "Chizuru brought them here and she is an Oni, which is synonymous with being a demon, so in a sense you

could say it's an act against god, but," and here she paused in thought, bringing her finger to her chin. "I never thought of Chizuru as evil. She was sweet and kind and helpful, a little timid and she hid behind Hijikata as if seeking protection when she was embarrassed, but she was not bad in any sense of the word. More of an angel in disguise than a nefarious demon."

Ryane was looking between me and our friend as if she wasn't sure what to say when Cat cleared her throat at the entrance. "To answer your original question," She said harshly, "You have never felt a love as strong as Ryane has, so you cannot add to the emotions she is putting into her lyrics. As for the guys of Umarekawaru being monsters, I felt the same way, though I never knew what they did in their past lives. Even not knowing, they scared the shit out of me. But I got to know them and fell in love. You'll meet them at the party I am sure, though you won't know who they are at the time. Just do yourself a favorâ€¦don't fall in love."

The week passed pretty swiftly after that, and I woke up the morning of the masquerade feeling a touch of nervousness creep through me which grew stronger as the day progressed. I was sure Shukke would make me look like a giant bug. It was Halloween after all.

After the Lollipop Video Incident, as I called it, Ryane had moved back into the house she rented with Shukke and Cat. At first I had been lonely living by myself again; Ryane had been a chipper but noisy roommate and I had gotten used to that. Then Shukke came to me with an offer to live in the attic of their house for a low monthly rent that they would use to buy groceries.

And so, as had become usual for me, I opened the door leading from the attic stairs and made to walk to the bathroom. What was unusual about today was the large square garment box laying there in front of my door. Looking carefully at it, there was a post-it note with the words 'Your Costume' carefully written along with a smiley face holding two fingers up in a peace sign.

At once nervous and excited I completely forgot about the bathroom and carried the parcel back upstairs, pausing to do my habitual Bug Scan. It was an attic after all. There across the room, hovering over my bed I saw, "Spider! Kill IT!"

Out of nowhere Ryane was running up the stairs and do some weird half flip jump thing over my laundry basket, a broom in one hand and a wad of toilet paper in the other. She glared at my wall where I pointed at the ugly multi-legged thing only to spot it and fall to the ground laughing.

"What! Kill it!" I shrieked. But Ryane just continued to laugh as Cat ran in with a heavy looking book from Ryane's collection. Cat looked from me to the spider to Ryane laughing on the floor to me to the spider before face palming.

"Stacyâ€¦" Cat sounded frustrated, "That is a fuzzy from your blanket."

"What?! You lie!" I dared to get a little closer and shrank back again. I swear it moved.

"Note the purple color." Cat pointed at it and walked closer to the

fuzzy. Ryane laughed harder.

Shukke took that moment to pop out of nowhere and sigh. She looked at the costume sill in its box and sighed again. "Our plane is leaving in an hour; we should be on the way to the airportâ€¦not playing with fuzz."

"I don't see why you get to go to New York with her but we have to sit here and wait obediently for you Cinderellas to come home." Cat grouched as Shukke walked over and began to drag me down the stairs.

"Ryane, grab her costume and meet us at the busâ€¦ you're driving." Shukke completely ignored the complaint and continued downstairs and right out the door.

"Alright but you're getting us souvenirs. Something expensive mind you." Ryane called before grabbing my costume and following, leaving Cat to pout.

It was an awkward ride to the airport and an even more awkward wait for our plane to take off. Every time I tried to talk to Shukke she would just ignore me or give one word answers until I gave up on the idea.

Shukke insisted she would not be at the masquerade and it wasn't until we reached JFK International that I fully realized one of the reasons she said she was there; there were way too many people. I took two steps into the airport, got disoriented and took a wrong turn only to have Shukke calmly directed me to luggage. It happened again when we exited the airport and again when we entered the hotel.

I was shocked when we got to the luxurious, expensive looking hotel and even more so when we were greeted cheerily and given a key to the top floor penthouse. "Shukke, who is paying for this?" It was a question that sounded as suspicious to my ears as I felt. And I knew the answer before she said it nonchalantly.

"Shinpachi helped." She was smiling, I could tell even with her back to me.

"Why?" I asked, foolishly thinking maybe she was in a sharing mood.

"The ball is in two hours and we need to get your hair done. Change into your costume already." There it was; the infamous topic change. She wasn't even trying to be subtle anymore. No transition material or anything.

That train of thought disappeared and was replaced by wonder as I opened the box holding my costume. It was a replica of the dress and wings Drew Barrymore wore in Ever After. The cream colored dress had clear crystals along the neckline and on the sleeves and the wingsâ€¦oh the wings. They were white and elegantly made. I would look like a fairy princess rather than a butterfly.

"Well," Shukke drawled, "Stop gawking and put it on. I'll leave you to it." And she left.

The fabric was a bit scratchy when I put it on, but I felt so regal that I didn't mind. The wings were actually sewn into the dress so I wouldn't have to worry about white straps showing against the dress or something stupid like that. I twirled once in the mirror and decided not to twirl while I danced tonight; the wings pulled awkwardly when I did.

Without knocking Shukke came back into the room with a handful of tiny, clear rubber bands and a brush to tame my curly strawberry blond hair. I was initially worried when I heard Shukke was coming to New York to do my hair and makeup but now, seeing this dress, I was not so afraid and the end product of tiny half braids going the circumference of my head and a bit of gold glitter was something to marvel at. When she finished my friend slipped a delicate metal mask over my eyes. It too had smaller white wings coming out of its sides of its otherwise pure, unadorned metal.

The last fifteen minutes before the party were spent in a cab and I arrived right before the doors were shut and locked for the event. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I had, by far, the classiest costume of the women there. Everyone else as barely clothed and about sixty percent came as cats. There were two angels glaring at each other in a corner and a devil by the snacks. There were about six fairies that I could see; all of them dressed with as little clothing as possible.

The men were all pretty dapper looking, well at least in the sense that most were fully clothed. A lot were dressed as Samurai, which made sense. They all wore swords. Some men seemed to be wearing fake, plastic swords though and the women were ignoring them. _They are trying to find the members of J-born._ I realized suddenly, a frown on my face. I also realized that the chances of anyone talking to me, much less dancing with me were slim since I wasn't dressed like a hooker. Of course as I thought this I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder causing me to while around, my wings tugging against the dress as I did so.

"Sorry," the gentleman, there really was no other way to describe his actions and demeanor, said while he adjusted his golden colored mask like he would a pair of glasses. "I didn't mean to startle you."

I took in his shoulder length, shocking white hair and the glowing red eyes behind that golden mask and gasp just a little. I had seen other men with this combination of coloring in the sea of people, but it looked _right_ on him. "It's alright." I said after a while, realizing that I was staring.

"This costume is a bit much isn't it?" He asked, gesturing at the full length of his body starting at his head and moving down the length of the long black overcoat that looked exactly like the one Sannan wore in Hakuouki: Hekketsu-roku. "A bunch of friends thought it would be interesting to dress like this, considering what this event is for. They seem to be having more luck then me at finding companions though. I guess Sannan is not a crowd favorite."

"Not to sound overly flirtatious or anything, but he was my favorite when I watched the anime. I think you pull it off well, except you're not wearing glasses."

"I am afraid they would have interfered with the mask, unfortunately.

This era has contacts in any case." He grinned as he spoke and I found myself smiling in response.

"I suppose your rightâ€¦" I conceded.

"Might I ask... are you a fairy or a butterfly?"

Still smiling I replied, "My friend told me I would be coming as a butterfly, but I do feel more like a fairy in this dress. It is just as well, I guess, since white winged butterflies are the pests of New Zealand horticulture." Immediately realizing I said something incredibly geeky I covered my mouth with my hand and waited for him to scoff, mock and then walk away.

He surprised me, instead saying without missing a beat, "Indeed, though someone as beautiful as you would be invited to my garden any day, even if it was to eat all my vegetables." His smile never left his mouth. "You lack antennae too. So I suppose the only logical explanation is that you are a fairy." He looked crestfallen at that.

"Well don't look so sadâ€¦" I teased.

"It's just that I have seen many fairies already tonight and I was rather looking forward to finding a butterfly." He sounded so wistful that I stopped smiling.

"The night is still young I am sure you will find one." It came out more curtly than I intended and I made to turn and walk away.

"Alas," He said as he reached to grab my hand. "I am afraid it is too late to rendezvous with a butterfly when I already have met the most enchanting woman at the masquerade. It is only slightly unfortunate that she is a fairy rather than a butterfly." Still miffed I didn't turn around so he moved to stand in front of me. "I would ask you to dance, really I would, but midnight is about to strike on this fairy tale, for it is almost ten o'clock. I know it goes against the grain, seeing as how this is a masked ball, but may I ask your name?"

I didn't understand what the significance of ten o'clock was but since he was asking my name I realized I had made quite the impression on this mystery man. A feeling stirred in me briefly as I looked into those red contact eyes and told him my name. I saw a bit of surprise there but it passed so quickly I thought I was imagining it.

"Well Stacy," He looked over at a clock on the wall and then back at me. "I beg your forgiveness, but." And he let go of my hand as the lights went out suddenly.

"Forgiveness?" I muttered as a voice echoed through the darkness.

"Geeze, the nerd is late." The crowd pushed towards the stage placed against the back wall of the ballroom. "Sannan lets go."

"Calm down Okita," A familiar voice said from the stage.

The lights snapped on and there on stage were seven very famous

faces, all with that shocking white hair and those red Rasetsu eyes. None were wearing masks, but they all had the captain outfits from the second season of the anime on. The vocalist was scanning the crowd and when his eyes lit on me they held a plea in them. Like he, too, was asking for forgiveness though I couldn't explain why.

"This release is, like any other song we have written and performed, something that comes from the heart." As the vocalist spoke, he unconsciously stroked the shorter of his two swords. The rest of the band got in position. "Translations will be explained later, so please listen to us. This is Liar."

The song started with Sannan on the keyboard and then Hijikata on his bass before Saito was singing, the crowd screaming.

_What do you want from me? Just let me breathe a little
>What do you want to see? Me ni mieru mono?
What do you want to believe? Still nothing can settled
>Hold on your words you say It's no good

Nani wo motome soshite nani wo ukeireru?
>Futatsu ni hitotsu! Boku ni wa mada sore ga I don't know

>Tonari de warau kimi wa

His voice sounded so raw as he sang his feelings unfiltered and unhindered.

Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>What do you think of living without me?
>Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>Nani ga uso de dore ga shinjitsu?

Must be a dream I see marude deja vu no you
>Trying so hard to know inside of you
>Staring your eyes to feel kono omoi ga todoku youni to

>Negau kedo risou to wa urahara So cold
>Tonari de hohoemu kimi...

Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>Are mo kore mo uso jya mou
>I'm tired, so tired
>What do you think of living without me?

There is nothing left to bleed
>My heart can't take this anymore

Saito was screaming. Normally Hijikata was the screamer in songs, but there was so much raw emotion in the vocalist's voice as he performed that I felt tears in my eyes. I remembered the promise Ryane said she made to him. That she would listen to all of his love songs and know they were for her. But she gave back his sword, the sign that he loved her. He must think that concluded the promise, making Ryane a liar. That was the reason behind his heartfelt screams.

Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>What do you think of living without me?
>Nee Liar, Oh yea Liar
>Todomaru koto wa muimi?

It was so sad, I couldn't clap and cheer with the rest of the fans who were screaming and reaching for the band as they bowed. I couldn't stand there anymore. I cast a look at Sannan, who was the real Sannan and I locked eyes with him. He looked so apologetic about the song and I remembered, _I beg your forgiveness_, the shock in his eyes when I said my name.

He knew exactly who I was.

As we stared at each other one of the drummers walked over and nudged the pianist and muttered something in his ear. Sannan blinked, frowned and looked away from me, something like regret in his eyes and I stormed away from the stage and out of the ballroom. A fierce wind was blowing outside causing me to have to hold the wings attached to my dress close to my body so they wouldn't blow off.

A sharp whistle caused me to look to the left. There, standing against the large hotel I had just stormed out of was Shukke, a pissed expression on her face. _She heard the song._

"Let's get out of here," She growled. I nodded and she gestured to a waiting cab, our luggage was already inside it. "You can change at the airport." She told me firmly, for which I was glad. I just wanted to go home.

But deep down inside something wanted to stay. Something wanted to confront the man I had been talking to as another human being at a masquerade instead of talking to him as a plain Jane to a rock star. Tonight really was like Cinderella. And as I thought about the man who I had assimilated with a monster when I found out the truth of the gimmick I realized that, even with just that brief moment with the strange, gentlemanly out of time samurai, I probably couldn't follow Cat's advice.

I already wanted to be his equal.

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

Sannan was staring at the geeky girl he had been talking to as he felt a jab into his stomach. Harada's whisper floated into his ear and he frowned. "Remember the contract. That girl is off limits." He turned back to where he had been staring but another girl had filled the space. She was gone and she didn't leave a glass slipper.

"I'll ask Shukke about her later," Shinpachi promised from his right.

"Oi, don't get in troubled," Harada advised.

"You knew who she was?" Sannan sounded annoyed at that.

"Yeah, _she_ told me all about the messenger and what she would be wearing. She didn't really look like a butterfly to me though." Shinpachi grumbled as the fans continued to cover their conversation with screaming and cheers.

Sannan just frowned at the news. At length he advised, "Don't get

caught."

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Liar by ONE OK ROCK (New song by Umarekawaru (translations will come next chapter))

24. Throw Away: The Apology

A/N:

Underlined text means the person is talking in Japanese.

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 23<p>

~Throw Away; The Apology~

The Oni Complex:

"_And for the third week in a row Liar is the top song on this weekly Billboard Top 40 countdown. Thanks for listening and please tune in to the newly revived TRL that I, DJ White Saille will be hosting weekdays at six o'clock starting Wednesday. Our first guest will be Umarekawaru. That's right J-born will be in the house."_

Kazama switched the radio off in a huff. Second place for three weeks was not acceptable but Kaoru's song could change everything. "It had better." The blonde muttered to himself.

"Oi, Kazamaâ€¦" Shiranui walked over and leaned against the wall next to his vocalist and leader.

"What?" He snarled annoyed at being distracted from his ruminations and in response the gunman waved a professional looking camera in his face with a smirk. "You found something?"

"An ace up our sleeve if you want to think of it that way." Shiranui replied, tugging on his own purple ponytail distractedly. "Are we using it immediately?"

"No." Kazama said firmly. "We will use Kaoru's song first."

"Try to win with pride, eh?" The other Oni smirked, "Amagiri will be pleased at least."

"One way or another." Kazama opened up a water bottle beside his seat and drank deeply. "We have work to do."

"Alright," Someone was saying on a stage not far away, "And now for our last guests of the night, The Oni Complex!"

Kazama couldn't help the sneer on his face as he walked out amidst

the noise of his and the band's cheering fans, but it was what most people considered to be in character for the vocalist so it didn't matter. Shiranui was smirking behind him, giving little half waves to the crowd and causing the younger girls in the audience to make more noise, which was really just irritating. Amagiri was behind him and the big red head stopped and bowed politely before walking over and talking a seat next to the guitarist on the set of some late night talk show host. Kaoru walked on last looking a bit sheepish to the cat calls of the various women.

Kazama and Kaoru both took their swords from their belts before they moved to sit down and Shiranui sat carefully, slouching back. Amagiri perched on edge of his seat, looking wary.

"Welcome, welcome." The host said to them in a falsely chipper voice. "Sorry for the wait."

"Ah, because a dog whisperer is so much more impressive." Kazama drawled of the guest before them.

"Kazamaâ€¦" Amagiri warned.

"Amagiri," Kazama turned his attention to the drummer, "I am fully aware of the repercussions of my actions and what I say. You have no need to fret." The drummer sat a bit more comfortably in his chair.

"Well, um," The host began, getting nervous. Kazama was known for giving rough interviews, but that's why the fans loved him so much. His 'I don't give a fuck' attitude towards people, as if he were superior in every way, was well received for some reason. 'Holier than thou' one reporter had said of the way he held himself above others. Some people thought it led credence to the theory that he really was an Oni but again the majority of the people who had put thought into the whole idea figured that it was a well thought out gimmick and that his attitude only mimicked the anime. As it stood, neither Kazama nor Kaoru had drawn their weapons in an interview and as far as anyone knew Shiranui never had a gun on him. That knowledge did not stop the host from looking at the Douji-giri in trepidation.

Gathering up the small amount of courage he had the man began. "Well it's uh, great to meet you guys. I have heard a lot about youâ€¦"

"And how much have you heard do you give credence to?" Kazama drawled.

"I suppose that depends on what he heard Kazama." Shiranui laughed easily.

"Stay calm," Amagiri said, though it was unclear if he was talking to Kazama who prickled at the purple head's laughter or to the host who looked fairly terrified.

"Shiranui," the blonde began before switching to his native Japanese, "Know your place."

"You're no fun Kazama," The gunman teased, causing Kazama to move with lightning speed to unsheathe his sword and place is at his band

mate's neck. Some people in the crowd screamed as Shiranui moved with equal speed to pull out his two ancient pistols and _step_ away from Kazama.

"Oh, he's done it now," Kaoru said with a little smile as Amagiri looked between the two in a mild display of frustration.

"Gentlemen," The host tried to reign in the chaos only to have Shiranui fire a silver bullet into the desk the man was seated at, embedding the projectile into the wood between the host's splayed fingers. More screams ensued. The host was as white as a ghost.

"Stop this," Kazama ordered clearly.

"But it's so much fun."

"Tch, I'll put you down; but after the show. I don't want to show these humans something unpleasant." Kazama sheathed his sword and sat back down in a rather regal manner. "You were saying?" He directed at the host, who laughed nervously and also sat back into his seat. Shiranui just snorted, re-holstered his weapons and took his seat again as well.

"You just said 'humans'â€¦" The host pointed out. He knew about the blanket rule but couldn't help himself in his state of shock. He wasn't one to believe unbelievable things, but the speed these men moved atâ€¦it was unnatural.

"That's what you are, aren't you?" Kazama countered with the usual drawl.

"Aren't you?" The host asked flinching at the anger in the vocalists eyes at the suggestion. It was like he had never been so offended in his life and would have liked nothing better than to slice the host in half right there where he sat.

"We are not going to have the time to play our new song if we don't start now," the littlest member announced calmly to interrupt the heat in his band mate's eyes.

"Oh, right, you have a new song for us tonight right?" The host seized the opportunity to talk about something else hungrily.

"Yes," Kazama said, with what sounded like relief at the distraction. "Kaoru wrote it. He said it's about how he feels in life and past experiences with the family he grew up with and the sister he had before that."

"Kazama! That was a secret!" Kaoru teased with mock horror.

The band migrated to the instruments set up on stage right as Kazama said, "Whatever, this is Throw Away."

Kazama began to strum at his bass before crooning,

_Just survive
>Survive

And the whole band came in shortly after playing a slow melodic sound. Then, as everything got quiet, Kaoru played a slow tune on the keyboard. _Dun dun dun dundundun_.

_We are thrown away,
>In the house you made of every stolen moment.

Don't pretend,
>I know how this ends, and who you are in secret.

All our hopes are fast asleep,
>Spill the wrist of what you'll never be.

And I'll never say that everything's alright,
>That when we're gone we'll sleep with satellites,

>We're killing more than the loneliness behind the eyes,

>Sometimes the best that you can do is just survive.

It was hypnotizing.

Something's wrong inside,
>We are feeding flies with pieces of ambition.

Prison skin,
>Keeps us safety pinned
>...I'll whisper your incision.

Hostile strum and icepick tongue
>Shelter here from everyone

And I'll never say that everything's alright,
>That when we're gone we'll sleep with satellites,

>We're killing more than the loneliness behind the eyes,

_And I'll never say that everything's alright,
>That when we're gone we'll sleep with satellites,
We're killing more than the loneliness behind the eyes,
>Sometimes the best that you can do is just survive.

...Just survive.
>Surviveâ€¦
>Just survive.

And as Kaoru played that six note tune to end the song the crowd was on its feet. The band bowed as they placed instruments on stands and then _stepped_ out the backstage door and to their tour bus.

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

I couldn't honestly say I hated the Oni Complex as a band. On the other hand, I could admit to hating them as people from what I had heard in interviews. It didn't matter to me if they were Oni or whatever; there are ways to treat people. They didn't even get along with each other either, if the fight on that late night show proved

anything from last night.

But after I got the chance to glance over the interview Souji and Saito did for People Magazine the week their new song debuted I could tell you I liked the Oni as people a whole lot more than Umarekawaru right about now. They still wouldn't admit to our love or their love but they seemed to be able to explain the song easily enough and in a way that both Ryane and I understood.

"_What do the lyrics of Liar mean?"_

"_Well the English translation would readâ€¦_

_What do you want from me? Just let me breathe a little
>What do you want to see? What's in front of your eyes?
What do you want to believe? Still nothing can be settled
>Hold on your words you say
It's no good_

What are your demands? What do you think you're getting out of this?
>It's one or the other! I still don't understand
>What this all is, I don't know
>Beside me, laughing, you are...

Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>What do you think of living without me?
>Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>Not knowing what's lies, what is truth?

Must be a dream I see
>It's like deja vu again
>Trying so hard to know inside of you
>Staring your eyes to feel
>Wishing to break through to you, but it's a hopeless dream

>So cold
>You're beside me, smiling...

_Hey Liar, Hey Liar__
>_If everything has been a lie, then__
>_I'm tired, so tired__
>_What do you think of living without me?_

There is nothing left to bleed
>My heart can't take this anymore

Hey Liar, Hey Liar
>What do you think of living without me?
>Hey Liar, Oh yea Liar
>Is there any reason to stay here

As for a deeper meaning, I received something back that should have always stayed where I left it."

That had confused the interviewer so much that the subject had dropped and they went on to more typical nonsense, but the band skated through the topics, skillfully omitting certain things and avoiding pitfalls.

Shukke said we had to watch the newly revived TRL on Wednesday and

all I could think was, _Oh joy, more Umarekawaru!_ Cue the sarcasm.

Ryane had seemed a bit crushed by the fact that Saito had not explained properly what he was singing about. And by 'a bit' I mean it was like a boulder the size and weight of a dozen fully grown elephants that were dancing the Macarena landed smack dab on her forehead. I think a part of her was more pissed that he didn't use it as an opportunity to be honest than she was that he wrote and released it in the first place. And let me tell you, when Stacy came back and told her about the song I think my choke hold was the only thing stopping home girl from heading to New York; on foot if need be.

When the two guys had admitted that Souji had helped write the song's melody I was beyond mad too. _We_ were liars? Pffft puh-lease! If they had the balls to be honest we would not be in this mess.

I just thought it stupid funny Ryane had a date planned for Wednesday. She got sick of waiting on that idiot and this was the last straw so her friend was going to come over and they were going out. I had asked her if she was doing it to be defiant or something and when I expected her to say 'no, I just want to move on, it isn't like he will hear about it anyway.' She busted out with "Hell yeah I am doing it to get back at him. I know Shukke is bound to report it to Shinpachi and that will get him going. And I need to have some fun."

"Be safe." I'd told her.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

Wednesday. It was the best of timesâ€¦it was the worst of times. Ah who the hell am I kidding it was awful. My friend Brad, who had been asking me on dates for a solid two weeks before the interview pissed me off came and got me in his junky Honda Civic that was like twelve years old and smelled like beer and cigarettes. He told me we were going out to eat. We pulled in and parked at a McDonald's nestled a neat six blocks from my house.

How sweet.

After we ate, he stole most of my fries by the way, he drove me home and figuring why the hell not? I invited him in. Cat was out raking leaves in the backyard, Stacy was hiding in the attic and thank God I had no idea where Shukke was. So I snuck him in like a secret agent and up to my room. He seemed to get the wrong idea and went to kiss me. I wasn't like Saito though, I couldn't just kiss someone else no matter the reason, so I shoved him away, my hand going reactively to my side expecting to meet a sword but coming up empty.

"Come on Ryane, let's have some fun." He said in what he probably thought was a sexy manner and thank God in heaven and little Oni babies that Cat was walking by and stopped at my still open door. She was about to walk on by with a smile, but then she really looked at me, my hand grabbing at my waist for a sword that wasn't there anymore and she walked in.

"Ryane," I was saved. "TRL will be on in five minutes and Shukke is looking for you. She said it will be important for research." Thank you Cat!

"Research?" Brad asked, confused and slightly put off that he had been interrupted.

"By the way, Ryane," Cat ignored the guy asking her a question and looked directly at me. "_This_ is not being safe. You still love him right? Don't go taking random guys into your room." And she grabbed my hand, dragging me out the door and down to the living room, Brad following behind like a lost puppy.

"Oh," Shukke looked over from the T.V with a radiant smile as Cat went back upstairs to fetch our other friend. "Friend of yours Ryane?" She asked on seeing Brad.

"We were on a date." He said like a little child not getting his way.

"No you weren't" Shukke told him, still smiling. "You were out for revenge. You won't be getting anywhere with Ryane. Trust me. She belongs with someone else."

I didn't know how to feel about what Shukke just said, but didn't have time to ponder as Stacy barreled down the stairs with Cat hot on her heels. They plopped down and, like the show was waiting for them to get settled, DJ White Saille came on the television with a big grin.

"Welcome to TRL Revival. My name is DJ White Saille and I'll be bringing you the hottest videos and the baddest acts. Today we have J-born, tomorrow? Who knows? That will be a bit later though, for now let's roll out the number ten videoâ€¦"

Time past in that slow sort of way it always did when we waited for an interview with the guys to come on but that didn't seem to matter as Hajime Saito walked onto the set with the rest of the band behind him. He was wearing the same outfit he wore to the Christmas party and I felt myself tear up thinking about it.

"Hey guys, how are you?" White Saille asked with a smile, which all seven members returned with ease.

"Good," they all chorused before Hijikata continued.

"How are you today, DJ?" He asked calmly.

"Fantastic! Though I must say I was a bit confused with your interview with People, Hajime, Souji." She answered, getting right to the meat as was her style.

"Confused?" Hajime prompted.

"But I figured out what you were talking about." White Saille continued.

"Please be sure to tell us then, 'cause I have no idea what _you_ are talking about." Souji shot back casually with his trademark smirk.

"Hajime mentioned, when asked what the song meant, something that was given back to him that should have always stayed where he left it." Hajime gave a startled look at the DJ but she didn't seem to notice. "When I first interviewed you guys, I noted that Hajime and Souji both had one sword whereas all the other guys had two. Souji told me that the missing swords served as reminders elsewhere. Hajimeâ€¦you have two swords now. What happened?" I rolled my eyes. Here comes another lie.

"Well that is," Saito began, obviously trying to think of a good lie, when Hijikata cut in in Japanese. Since it was live T.V there was no translation at the bottom of the screen but it made Shukke, who was fluent enough in the language to understand basic conversation, gasp in shock.

"That's enough, Hajime." Saito's head snapped to the leader of their group. "We have enough fame now that we can just switch labels if we need to."

"But the fansâ€¦" Souji spoke up only to be silenced by Hijikata.

"They will support youâ€¦they still have other members to fawn over. Just be honest now. Don't run anymore. We will play _that_ song today. So explain it properly."

Hajime looked at his band, all of whom were nodding their heads to whatever was just said before taking a deep breath and saying two words that I never expected to hear from him. Two words that made me cry in relief. "I lied." White Saille smiled even bigger while the crowd chattered in confusion and speculation. "They are watching right Shinpachi?"

Just then Souji stopped the conversation as he looked to the back stage area. He obviously saw something that pissed him off. "One second Hajime." He said, "I am going next but firstâ€¦this is live T.V right Saille?"

"Well yeahâ€¦"

Souji jumped off the little dais and up to the front row amidst excitedly screaming teenagers and grabbed the one right in front of him who immediately clung to him like an octopus. Cat, who was sitting next to me looked like she wanted to skin one of them. I don't know if it was Okita or the girl though.

"Cut the feedâ€¦" Souji warned while drawing his sword, "And this girl in my arms will die." Some people in the crowd laughed while others didn't know how to react. DJ White Saille just continued to smile.

"You're kidding right?" She asked. "That isn't a real sword is it?"

Souji smirked, tilted the sword and slashed into his bare forearm. "You tell me." He said while people screamed. The girl looked about ready to faint but was probably so scared that if she moved the sword would cut her that she stayed alert, eyes wide, barely breathing. Sweat was sticking her bangs to her forehead.

"Soujiâ€¦" Hijikata began. "No one will listen if you scare them. Didn't Cat teach you anything?"

"Hey, Hajime first Hijikata." Souji said with a careful shrug. By that time though, people were thinking it was a part of an act I think, because they started to calm down. "You were saying, Hajime?"

"Just so you know, Saito," Shinpachi said with a grin. "They are watching."

"In that caseâ€¦" And Saito looked right into the camera closest to him, turning slightly away from the crowd. "I lied. From the very first interview I lied. And the lies likely killed any chance at redemption, but tonight I will try to gain just that. When I and my band mates arrived in Rochester, New York we had nowhere to go and were taken in by a most enchanting woman and her two friends. These women became our friends, but there was more to it than we have let on. At least for two of us there was." Saito turned to the crowd to continue his tale. "Her name is Ryane, and for as long as I have been here I have been hers completely. I did write our song Comatose for her.

"She accepted my love and in time, hesitantly at first, returned it. When we got our record contract, Amalgamated Records ordered that we not divulge information about anyone we were with at the time and told us to cut ties with anyone without fame." Here Saito turned back to the camera. "The manager said it was for your protection, Ryane." He spoke directly to me. "And that if our fans found out about the love we had you would not be safe. I didn't know what to expect. I could not risk you, though the lies more than likely made forgiveness impossible." As I watched, with tears streaming down my face, Saito got down on the floor and bowed low to the camera in a position of humility and shame.

The crowd watched, shocked as he spoke again, a sob in his voice. "I was wrong. In not explaining anything to you. In making it impossible for you to say goodbye. In ignoring you at the concert. I was so wrong. And then you returned it to me. The sword that meant more as a reminder of my love for you than it ever did at my own side. I was so mad. So hurt. Liar was not intended to ever get recorded though. The guys were playing something and I gave it lyrics on the spot. Angry, hurtful, doubtful lyrics that should have never left the recording studio. But our manager heard and even though we fought it, he insisted that it would be our next song."

He looked into the camera, a couple tears in his eyes that he couldn't fight back. His eyes, those beautiful azures, were filled with a longing and a pain and a love that had the girls in the crowd crying and sighing over them. "Forgive me." He begged.

"Awwwww" the girls all cried and there was a smattering of applause and cheering that quickly died down as the girls realized he was serious.

"Way to look cool even when you're crying, Hajime." Souji called, "But let me say something now."

"My apologies for taking so long, Souji." Hajime said with a small

tearful smile.

"Cat!" Souji looked right at the camera as well, addressing my friend through the television. "You kept the sword so you could take my head with it right? We will be in Rochester soon then. Shukke will get a time and day. You three come to the park we used to practice at and you can take my head. If that is the punishment the woman I love chooses to bestow upon me for my sins I will take it. I say this because I had nothing too great to live for, not back then. But if the reason I came up with wants no part of me, she can do with me as she likes. One last gift before thatâ€¦ this song. Hajime you introduce it."

"Ryane," Hajime said to the camera. "Do you remember the tune I hummed you that last night we spent together? The one born of my feelings for you? I finished that song. This song. It is about us, what you mean to me and what has happened to us. Know that I love you. And being somebody means nothing if I have to go so far as I have from you. This is Be Somebody."

Okita sheathed his sword and gently pushed his hostage towards her seat before the band walked somberly over to the instruments set up for them. Okita played a note on his guitar and Hajime was singing before the second.

_I'm just the boy inside the man, not exactly who you think I am

>Trying to trace my steps back here again, so many times
I'm just a speck inside your head, you came and made me who I am
>I remember where it all began, so clearly

I feel a million miles away, still you connect me in your way

>And you create in me, something I would've never seen

>When I can only see the floor, you made my window a door

>So when they say they don't believe, I hope that they see you and me

Heisuke began strumming on an acoustic along with Okita's guitar.

After all the lights go down, I'm just the words you are the sound

>A strange type of chemistry, how you've become a part of me

>And when I sit alone at night, your thoughts burn through me like a fire
>You're the only one who knows, who I really am

In came the drums and the rest of the band, the words Saito sang following the tune he hummed to me that night flawlessly.

We all wanna be somebody, we just need a taste of who we are

>We all wanna be somebody, we're willing to go but not that far

And we're all see through, just like glass

>And we can shatter just as fast
>That light's been burned out for a while, I still see it every time I pass
>Okita began crooning along to the song as he played.
It was lost in the coldness of my mind, behind a box of reasons why
>I never doubted it was there, just took a little time to find
And even when..._

I feel a million miles away, still you connect me in your way

>And you create in me, something I would've never seen

>When I can only see the floor, you made my window a door

>So when they say they don't believe I hope that they see you and me
>After all the lights go down, I'm just the words you are the sound
>A strange type of chemistry, how you've become a part of me

>And when I sit alone at night, your thoughts burn through me like a fire
>You're the only one who knows, who I really am

We all wanna be somebody, we just need a taste of who we are

>We all wanna be somebody, we're willing to go but not that far
>We all wanna be somebody (Be somebody), we just need a taste of who we are
>We all wanna be somebody (Be somebody), we're willing to go but not that far

I'm just the boy inside the man, not exactly who you think I am

>Trying to trace my steps back here again, so many times

>When I can only see the floor, you made my window a door

>So when they say they don't believe, I hope that they see you and me

As they finished the song, Saito's voice was half hoarse from trying to sing through the tears sliding down his face and what I was sure was a lump of emotion in his throat. His eyes were closed and that small half smile he usually performed with had fallen away. When the camera panned to Souji he was also looking rather serious compared to his normal demeanor. Both men, and then their band, bowed deeply before walking off the stage.

The camera panned to a stunned crowd and all of a sudden a girl in the back of the room, tears streaming down her face and onto her 'I love Hajime' shirt, stood up and cried out, "We love you Hajime! Get her back!"

Another girl next to her screamed "Go for it Souji!" And then the whole crowd was going nuts cheering for the happiness of the two idols. And then the camera went black, a 'Please wait, technical issues' message showing on the screen instead.

I was pretty sure that their manager had been trying to get the live feed cut, which is why Okita had grabbed his hostage teenager, but the damage was done, so why they cut it off there was something I didn't understand.

Shukke pulled me out of my musings with her question, which like other things she had done and said in the recent past, had the power to change lives.

"So," she said casually, "Still wanna do this whole band thing?"

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Throw Away by Blue Stahli (The Oni Complex's new song)

Liar by ONE OK ROCK (New song by Umarekawaru(translated))

Be Somebody by Thousand Foot Krutch (Umarekawaru's apology song)

25. The One Year Mark: The Answer Is

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 24<p>

~The One Year Mark; The Answer Is~

"So?" Shukke asked us after the broadcast cut off, "Still wanna do this whole band thing?"

"Wait, they were talking about you?" A very much forgotten Brad asked.

"Why is he still here?" Cat asked, pointing her thumb in my friend's direction.

"I forgot to kick him out," Shukke said with a shrug. "Now that he understands how little of a date he was on he can leave though, right?" She glared at him.

"What band are you talking about?" Brad asked instead of leaving.

"You don't need to know!" I snapped before grabbing him by the scruff of his shirt and dragging him to the door the whole time saying quite bluntly, "It's not you it's me, it wouldn't have worked out," and all sorts of other clichÃ©s.

"Heyâ€¦wa-wait what about-" And I shut the door in his face.

"You were saying, Shukke?" I asked over the sound of Brad banging on

the door.

"I was saying you guys can forget about being in the band now if you want. They apologized and admitted to the world how they truly felt. You could just go back to them and that would be that." Her face was devoid of emotion but her eyes twinkled. I couldn't tell if it was from mischief or joy. Cat sat very still in her seat, her right hand gripping the hilt of Souji's sword so tightly that a vein was starting to show in her forearm.

I said it, but I knew she was thinking it, "They got some balls if they think that is gonna get them free and clear of all this." Cat's head snapped up and Shukke gave a big trickster grin before I spoke again. "I say we do Plan B."

"I really don't want to be some camp following bimbo that just trails after him," Cat agreed with a smirk that would have made Okita proud.

Stacy surprised us by having her own two cents, "Relationships are built between equals with common footing."

"I'll be the one to tell them then." Shukke announced and like they had been waiting for us to decide, the tall girl's phone went off with a text message tone and she dove for it, the grin still on her face.

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

We will be there.

Shinpachi grinned at the text he got in response to the one he sent Shukke. The little minx could be a trickster and had plans more complex than any strategist during the war had been capable of but that was ok. She had pulled through.

Saito and Okita, who looked like men waiting to commit seppuku on command, caught sight of his grin and seemed to relax. "They will be there?" Saito asked, what looked like a small glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"So the text says." The muscled drummer informed the rest of the band.

The group, who had been huddled together around Shinpachi as he texted his traitorous connection, collectively breathe a sigh of relief; short lived though it was as their manager stormed over. The show was back on the air at this point, DJ White Saille introducing the number three video.

Hijikata, spotting the angry little toad walking towards them with a furious expression, turned to a small girl who looked no older then sixteen. She flipped a switch on the table next to her just as the manager reached them. The DJ was about to play the video when the whole audience as well as the whole nation heard the shouts of the manager, amplified through the microphones still pinned to the Shinsengumi's shirts.

"You're fired!" He shouted. "Disobedient, contract breaking malcontents the lot of you! You can't be _in love_! You can't have _relationships._ What will your fans think?"

"I think the cheering proved what the fans think." Hijikata spoke like he was talking to a testy three year old.

The manager gaped at him with the face of a dead fish before screeching, "You're done in this business. Stupid, no talent gimmick band. Without those faces you wouldn't have made it this far." The phones backstage were ringing off the hook and the crowd in front of White Saille was sounding off in distress.

Finally White Saille appeared after getting into the third video with difficulty. "How did the microphones turn back on?" She asked looking to the switch board, which was currently unmanned. "Whatever, everyone heard that so you may as well come back on stage and help me deal with it. You stay there." She commanded of the manager darkly. "I feel they might kill you if you come."

The number three video finished as Saille and the band walked onstage to cheers and crying fans.

"We love you!" A girl in the front row shouted. The band bowed in her direction and Souji winked with a smirk. The girl passed out.

"So," Saille turned to the band and in a very blunt manner pointed, "You're firedâ€¦ No longer with Amalgamated Records. What now?"

Hijikata stepped forward as the spokesperson. "Well, some of us, which is to say myself, Sannan, Shinpachi and Harada, have been planning for this fallout. The band has been saving capital for this, and with the amount we have saved we can produce our own songs on our own label. We even have a manager and the owner of the company decided." With that two people walked out, both also with swords at their hips and it got the crowd whispering.

A young girl, no older than sixteen shyly stepped up to stand next to Hijikata while an older man with the same hair style as Okita walked more slowly to flank the vice commander.

"This is Chizuru Yukimura and Isami Kondou. Please treat them well." Hijikata said before bowing again. The two new comers bowed beside him.

"More names to fit the gimmick huh?" Saille muttered.

"Call it what you will, Miss." Kondou said with a smile. "All will be made clear in time."

"What is the name of your record company?" The DJ asked to change the subject.

"It's called Shieikan Records," Kondou said proudly.

"We look forward to your work then! Unfortunately I have to announce the number two video or we would talk more. Number two on this daily countdown for video domination is 'Throw Away' By the Oni Complex."

As the video played the band got a bit of a meet and greet going with their fans in the stands. White Saille was trying to get a bit of order before the song ended but was called backstage by a producer. As she came back onstage the video ended and the crowd made an attempt at being quiet.

"Well, due to the excitement brought to us courtesy of the boys of J-born we don't have enough time to play the number one video." The DJ announced to a disappointed crowd. "The number one video was Liar by Umarekawaru though so give it up for them. And look forward to their work with Shieikan Records." After the crowd responded the Shinsengumi bowed and waved till the credits kicked on.

* * *

><p>Somewhere in Japan:<p>

It had been a long time since she had left her house and consorted with humans. Almost one hundred years. It wasn't that she thought ill of the species, or thought she was better than them. It was just that she was always so forcibly reminded of her dear friend, who chose humans over her own kind during the Bakumatsu.

There were not many Oni left in the world. They tended to hide from the populations of humans for safety's sake. The fact that she was alone, always, didn't bother her anymore. Though she sometimes thought back to eating Dango on the streets of Kyoto with her dear friend and lamented the way things had turned out. The decline of the Oni population, the modernization of the world, her own loneliness.

But it was the modern technology that brought her the biggest shock she had had since her dear friend vanished without a trace as she skimmed a few blogs in English. Since that day six months ago, after reading of Umarekawaru, a band from the states whose members bore a strong almost uncanny resemblance to the late Shinsengumi, she had saved every blog, newspaper clipping and video track of the band.

It could have been some weird reincarnation or the fates playing tricks on her mind. But then it happened. She saw a clip entitled "TRL Revival: Umarekawaru Goes Independent" and the Oni who had been so alone for so long almost blacked out as she saw the new manager for the band.

"Chizuru!"

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

"The phone is ringingâ€¦" Shiranui announced lazily.

"So answer it." Kazama snapped.

In the end Amagiri answered the phone as the two squabbled about who was being lazier. Kaoru opened the door to his room in their pent house suite to ask them to be quieter, but Shiranui shot a bullet past him into the doorjamb the smallest Oni was leaning against.

"It has been too long," They heard Amagiri say cordially. "Well your right, for us it was a blink of an eyeâ€¦ Kazama? Yes he is right here." And with that the tall red head handed the cordless to the vocalist with a patient smile. Kazama didn't ask who it was and Amagiri didn't give a name. The person on the phone had to be an Oni based off what Amagiri has said, and there were only a handful at best that would call Kazama.

"Ah, Sen-hime," Kazama answered the girl after she greeted him. "It's good to know you're still alive."

"One of the few." She replied shortly.

"What can I do for you? I doubt this is a call to see how I am." Kazama asked, getting straight to the point.

"Chizuru Yukimura. You lied when you said she disappeared after you killed Hijikata Toshizo. Or at least that wasn't all of it was it?"

"How astute of you."

"What happened?"

"It's gonna cost you," Kazama told her with a frown, "But I can think of a price later, there is nothing I want from you currently."

"Fine, just tell me what happened, where did she go, how are the Shinsengumi at her side again, and where did you go for one hundred years?" Sen-hime asked rapid fire.

"She used two Oni abilities at the same time to bring the Shinsengumi back to life and forward to December 2012 the day I killed Hakuouki. I waited a decade and then followed bringing back to life both Nagumo Kaoru and Kondou Isami in order to continue my fight against Hakuouki. But rest assured, music is our medium now." Kazama surprised her with his level of honesty and how forthright he was.

"I need to see her." Sen told him bluntly.

"I suppose you will be leaving Japan then, won't you?"

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

"You know, it doesn't feel like they are coming just to see us if it's the day before the sword competition they won last year. Doesn't at least Saito have to participate as the winner?" Cat complained in the snow the day the guys were set to meet with us. Of course, she wouldn't be going to the park to meet them, as it was my job to tell them the news, but she still felt the need to complain about it.

"They were told not to show at the competition because it would cause a frenzy." I told her with a short sigh.

"Don't you sigh at me, woman!" Cat snapped at me.

"I think they chose this day because it's been a year." Ryane interjected in a casual attempt to stop Cat's rampage before it began. "We can bring in the rest of the groceries without you, so head towards the park, eh?"

I nodded and began to walk. The trip itself was uneventful, the most exciting thing being a dog barking at me from behind a fence but it felt like that walk took decades. I had been fairly sure in what I would say to the boys when I met them, but knowing what I was going to say didn't make me feel less guilty.

We'll be there. I had said. It was a lie to imply that the other girls would be there too, but I felt they would not come if I texted anything else.

Saito and Okita were in sight now, though they must not have recognized me. It was only when Shinpachi ran forward and thwacked them both that they looked over at me, the hope and excitement dying in their eyes. When I reached the band they all looked disappointed.

"They are not coming are they?" Saito asked quietly.

I shook my head. "None of us are interested in being camp followers." I said clearly. "We will become your equals and when we get to that point we will meet you face to face. Until that time, don't get in our way, and judge our efforts honestly and clearly. This is the meaning of our Plan."

They looked struck and as I turned to walk away, Okita found his voice. "Why! Why can't she just come be with me? Why does she care about others thinking she is equal or not, as long as I think she is?"

"Because she won't think she is." I explained, my back still turned. With that I took a step forward only to have Saito grab my arm.

"Will you at least give this back to Ryane?" His hand went to his short sword and I felt bad as I refused.

"She can't be branded as yours if we are to walk the path we chose. Not yet anyway." I knew it was vague and confusing but I couldn't tell him anything of the plan. Not even Shinpachi knew any of this. He was probably angry. He thought I was bringing the girls back. In a way I had used him to ensure my own plan.

"Shukke," Ah there he was, he did sound upset. "What is going on?"

"There are some things I cannot explain. Trust me." I told him.

"You better make it right!" He said forcefully.

"You have my word." I assured him and walked away.

It would be made right.

26. Flowers and Water: The Promise

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 25<p>

~Flowers and Water; The Promise ~

"No, no, no you need to play a half second later then when you are coming in." Shukke instructed Cat in the last practice session before we planned to record our song to send to CBS studios for the nationwide battle show.

To avoid mass chaos the show requested, well more like required, that bands send a demo to the station and the pre-judges would pass through fifty bands. Then, those fifty bands would go to New York City for a live audition before the real judges and a studio audience. I guess the pre-judges were necessary to keep the judges from becoming biased right off the bat. Shukke said it would work in our favor. She told us she knew who the three judges were, and though she kept her source anonymous we all pretty much figured Shinpachi told her. So at least one judge was from Umarekawaru. The top fifty would be allowed two songs. One cover and one original. They could choose to play either one first, and after the first song the judges would choose if they wanted to listen to the second song or not.

We had engraved the cover song we were doing into our very beings, so now we were working on one of the originals we wroteâ€¦.or rather, that I wrote. Or even more so, the originals I wrote that Shukke found lacking and rewrote music for. It was one of those moments, you know, the kind you hate to admit to having even if you never say it out loud, because I couldn't even be mad that she changed everything. It was embarrassing but the songs were much better how she did them.

At least she was pleased with the lyrics.

"Alright!" Shukke stopped us abruptly sometime after Cat got her timing right. "This is as good as it's gonna get, so let's take a break."

"Why do you sound so disappointed?" I asked her with a slightly annoyed expression.

"Why are you singing off key?" She shot back at me.

"I am not!" Really I wasn't.

"Exactly," she reasoned. _Wait what?_ "Anyway we will take a five minute break before setting up the recording stuff so be ready."

"I don't sing off key!" I was going to make her admit it.

"You're still bitching about that?" Shukke asked in the kind of way that accused me of overreacting or putting too much stock in

something. "You should learn to let things go. What will you be like when a critic gives you negative feedback?"

"Now you're just trying to get on her nerves." Cat thwacked our drummer in the back of the head. "Behave! If she can't sing cause she has been screaming for five minutes what will we do? The demo has to be mailed today."

"About the submissionâ€¦" Stacy started softly.

"Second thoughts, Stacy?" I asked jokingly.

"No, but it's about the band name," She sounded nervous, and when Shukke gave her a 'go on,' look the bassist trembled a bit. "It gives the impression we are only doing this to get Ryane and Cat back to Saito and Okita. Don't you want to be famous for more than that?"

"She has a point," I mumbled. "Calling ourselves Plan B is a littleâ€¦I can't think of the word though."

"I think I understand," Shukke admitted, "But, what should we call ourselves then? It has to mean something or at least sound cool if we are changing it."

All of a sudden Cat's eyes widened and she hurriedly put her guitar down before running in the direction of the stairs.

"Cat?" I call after her, but she just kept running up the stairs to her room. From where we sat we could all hear her throwing something heavy and the 'ouch' that followed.

Finally she came back with a worn and creased piece of paper no bigger than her palm. She held this used paper to Shukke, who still sat at her drum set, and let the girl read the faded penmanship out loud.

If I am unable to move,_**
>_**Then the Darkness shall separate**_**

>_**Flowers and Water**

Begging isn't in my nature.
>But just this once,
>Please wait for me,
>So I can tell you how much I love youâ€¦

>Face to Face.

Okita Souji.

The words Okita wrote those many months ago were, quite possibly, the most beautiful I had ever heard. If only because he truly wasn't the begging type and for him to write something so desperateâ€¦ It almost made me forget the same thing had happened to me. Remembering the time apart from Saitoâ€¦from Hajime, I finally understood to some degree. Those men missed us just as much as we missed them.

Saito was a man who followed orders given by his superior without fail. It was a part of his pride. If Hijikata told him to do

something like this it was too engrained in him to follow the directive. But that didn't mean it did not hurt him.

These realizations took about a nanosecond and I was snapped back to reality by Shukke saying, "So, what is your suggestion?"

"Flowers and Water," Cat announced as she put her hands on her hips. I thought it made her look a little like a super hero. Like Captain Planet or something.

"I kinda like it," I said softly. "If no one understood the situation it would still sound like a cool name, and for those who find out it has a lot of meaning. A man going against his nature to leave loving words with the woman he cares for the most. It speaks of love."

"Exactly." Cat relaxed her posture.

"What do you think, Stacy?" Shukke asked our fourth member.

"I think it's romantic." Stacy said with a dreamy expression on her face.

"Even if I voted against it, which I wouldn't, but even if I did, I would lose. Alright I will mark us as Flowers and Water. They will ask why we chose the name though. How much are we going to admit to about our connection to Umarekawaru? We need to think about how we will answer certain questions."

"I guess winging it is out of the question." Cat grumbled.

"I doubt we have much choice." I told them with a grimace. "There is that Youtube video of me singing with Saito during the Ten Ugly Battles. Their fans will all recognize me."

"That's true." Shukke stroked her chin in thought. "Let's record this thing and then discuss my newest idea."

We got the call two weeks later from CBS. We were in! None of us really had too many obligations to tie together as far as going to NYC for however long so we just hopped into the bus that Shukke had repainted in Stacy's first design as a member of the family. And while I was relieved that we no longer drove in something that was a moving billboard for Umarekawaru it did feel a little weird.

The paint reflected out band name, from the bottom to about where the windows started was a giant lake with all sorts of flowers floating on the surface and then in between the windows were storm clouds and petals floating in a vicious breeze. The hood of the bus sported our band name in big bold black letters.

Most people would have argued that it was unwise to drive a bus, no matter how short, through New York City as a main mode of transportation but we viewed it as a good method of advertisement. Not that any of us were really thinking of that as Shukke recklessly drove down the interstate. I think at that point we were all wishing we had taken the complimentary plane tickets and saved ourselves the years she shaved off our lives with every near accident and each swerve through dense traffic. First traffic jam we hit in New York, Cat forced Shukke to the back seat and took over driving.

"You're gonna get us killed!" She shot to our beat pounding friend. Shukke just shrugged and happily began sightseeing out the window.

"Uh, guys?" Stacy interrupted our starry eyed gazing, "Where are we going to park?"

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

"So this is human civilization huh?" Sen-hime looked out of the window with the best view from where she sat in the pent house suite of the Oni turned rock stars in front of her. "I never figured you three would be catering to the masses. How does it feel to be slaves to the human entertainment industry?"

"Please," Kazama drawled, "Their reactions to us fuel my sense of humor. Even with evidence right in front of them those idiots still don't believe us to be demons."

"Yes, because goading them into reactions against Oni is such a good idea." Sen-hime half-snapped. "You passed through the Oni Hunt days. You don't understand the horrors. Or the dangers."

"I didn't think you would come all this way to chastise me. Couldn't you have done so over the phone?" Kazama snarked at her, "Or did you come here to see the girl?"

"I justâ€¦it's unsafe." Sen-hime told him one last time.

"Well as I was about to say, I will be judging in a band competition starting tonight, and that girl is likely to be there seeing as how Hakuouki's band will also be there. If you want to see her you can come with me. Just keep your distance, I don't need the media thinking I am with you."

"Fine by me. I have no use for those sorts of allegations either." She agreed.

"I still think it's tough luck that Hijikataâ€¦ oh fine, Hakuouki isn't going to be judging with you. He passed it off to their front man right?" Shiranui asked with a smile.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

Standing backstage in the green room was not as exciting as I thought it would be. That's right, battle time. But no one was talking amongst each other and there was none of the friendly rivalry going on that I had expected. There was a large plasma television on the south wall that would show each performance as the night progressed. As many bands as possible would compete tonight and then the remainder would go tomorrow on a special edition of the show that normally would broadcast twice a week. The day after that a results episode that would cut the competition in half would happen.

Both me and Cat had our fears that Saito or Okita would be one of the

judges and Shukke wasn't speaking on it. At that moment the rooms lights dimmed a bit and all eyes gravitated towards the plasma.

"_Welcome to the first annual America's Band Showdown! I am your host Nathaly. Let's meet the judges. On the right we have the casually abrasive and sinfully sexy Kazama of the Oni Complex. In the middle is the straight forward and lovable personality of DJ White Saille. And finally on the left we have the guy voted 'hottest man alive' this year, the gentle, sweet singing Hajime Saito."_

Greatâ€¦just great.I looked over to a relieved Cat and a sheepish Shukke with a dark look on my face. This was going to be interesting. Waitâ€¦did they just say 'hottest man alive'? Not that I couldn't see it but really?

"_Alright let's get this ball rolling." Nathaly commanded excitedly after the sound of the crowd cheering died away. "First off we have a band from Greece New York that goes by the name 14Phantom."_

There was cheering in the green room as I stared in shock at the bright blue hair of Ferah Sinest and her band making its way to the stage. Belatedly I called out, "Go Ferah!" She looked over at me and frowned.

Having the floor to themselves 14Phantom announced who they were and what they were playing and got the show off on the right foot. The judges decided to give them the chance to play a second song, though Kazama just grunted and said, "Sure why not."

They came back to the cheers still sounding behind them and the deathly quietness of the green room. Ferah sought me out.

"I didn't expect you to be here." She told me bluntly.

"What happened to getting signed?" I asked instead of replying.

"Well, no one wants to sign the band that would have come in second to Umarekawaru." She answered a bit snidely.

"I still think you could kick their asses if you wanted." I grinned at her but she just glared.

"I don't want to hear that from one of those guys' girlfriends."

"I haven't talked to Saito since he left." I informed her.

"Have you been living under a rock? All the media talks about are the mystery girls who are so important to those two. Why are you even here?" As much as I respected her talent, Ferah was beginning to irritate me.

"Because I refuse to lie down and take his affections back after what he did. We will be equal one way or another. And I will show _my _gift off now."

We were interrupted by the announcer calling the next band.

"_Next let's listen to the sounds of the all girl band from Rochester

New York, Flowers and Water!"_

"That's us!" Shukke announced, grabbing my arms.

"Show me that gift then." Ferah said over the green room exploding in good lucks.

"Remember the plan." Shukke told me lightly, possibly because she knew how nervous I was.

As we were about to walk onstage the lights cut out, which was a part of the plan.

"Oh goody, Umarekawaru fans. Hey Saito-san, they are copying you." Kazama drawled without missing a beat. Several people laughed.

"It is very difficult to play in the dark Kazama," Hajime informed him with little expression in his voice. "I look forward to seeing if these girls can pull it off."

"They are from Rochester too." Saille commented lightly.

Shukke had guessed one of the judges would comment on Umarekawaru and how we were pulling their stunt so she had given Stacy a list of responses to choose from. Only one member of J-born had heard Stacy's voice and Shukke figured Sannan would not put the pieces together fast enough to ruin the shock, or more likely would not want to ruin this for us, so she was our spokesperson for the first song.

"Hello, we are Flowers and Water and I am sorry if you have the misconception that we are J-born fans. This is just our way of having a little fun. We will be playing the cover song we chose first. It is the song that, out of everything on the radio today we hate most. About six to eight of you in the audience will know why. One judge will know why. Enough introduction though. This is the song we cannot accept. This is _Be Somebody._"

And Cat played that first note and I was singing with all the anger I felt towards Saito for thinking he could get out of all the pain he caused by this song and all the ache in my heart at the melody line that he had hummed to me before he left. I had to play the acoustic line since we only had one guitarist, but I did it just as well as any professional could have. It was the one song I knew on any instrument now.

We didn't change the gender of the song like most bands probably would. It was Saito's song, I wouldn't claim any part of it. And when we finished the crowd roared in approval.

"You girls realize you just announced you hated the number one song on the radio and every countdown on live T.V right?" Saille asked pertly as three dim spot lights flashed on over the judges. She was smiling an 'I know something you don't know' smile.

"We are fully aware of what we are doing!" Shukke called from her drum set. I hazarded a glance at Saito where he sat with the other judges and didn't know whether my reaction should be to laugh or cry. I suppose that it would depend on how annoyed I was with him. He looked as stoic as could be imagined but his eyes held a great deal of shock.

"I like these girls." Kazama said, shocking everyone, including us. "Taking such a pure, hopeful song and twisting it into something tormented and sad. Who are you again?"

"We are Flowers and Water." Stacy said again.

"How did you pick such a girly name?" Kazama scoffed.

"It's the last line of a poem I received as a goodbye when someone I was once involved with told me to wait for them." Cat announced in the darkness.

"So you waited for him?" Kazama asked skeptically.

"I did." Cat admitted, "But now it's time for a different approach. Love can only be true between people who can face each other with the feeling of equality." The crowd cheered at that.

Saito, who still had not spoken till this point, looked at the stage like he was trying to see through the darkness and asked the other judges, "Are we letting them sing their next song?"

"I'd say so," Kazama agreed.

"I'd like to hear what else they have to say with their music," The DJ announced.

"No more foolishness then, no more having fun. Let us see your faces." Saito commanded and the lights turned on.

There we stood in matching leather pants, studded and spiked bras and open leather jackets. The pants had a flower on the left leg by the hem in a puddle of water, and if we turned around the jackets would have our band name spray painted on them. My eyes were still locked on Saito and I knew I looked like a heroine junkie staring at a fix just out of reach. Saito was looking back at me with a similar expression.

DJ White Saille took one look at me and said quietly, "she looks awfully familiar."

That shook me out of the trance I was starting while staring at the object of my desire and back to reality I plummeted.

"Please hear our song, _The Promise_, it is, of course, written from the heart." I announced before standing a bit more firmly and closing my eyes. Taking a deep breath I opened them and began to sing, my eyes straying to Saito more than I wanted them to.

_She said 'It's just like Hollywood and I'm afraid
>Because the boy forgets the girl while she sits at home and waits
But you promised me you won't
>And you've never lied so please don't.
If you want LA then go to LA
>Despite the miles between us
My heart will never change
>'Cause you're all that it beats for
When you walk back through the door'_

I'm not saying that I don't believe

>I'm exactly where I want to be
>Don't you take that from me
>No

You know that I still get lost in your eyes?
>With your lips and your kiss and your hand in mine.

>You're all that I need
>And I promise I'll sleep fine tonight
>Just knowing you're here by my side
>Don't give this up
>Don't give this up

I'm not saying that I don't believe
>I'm exactly where I want to be
>Don't you take that from me
>No

You keep on running you're running away
>I'll be here waiting, wishing you could stay
>But I'll just remember the promise that you made

>Whoa
>I'll keep on fighting and fighting for you,
>I swear I would give you the sun and the moon
>If you just remember the promise you made

I'm not saying that I don't believe
>I'm exactly where I want to be
>Don't you take that from me
>No
>I'm not saying that I don't believe
>I'm exactly where I want to be
>Don't you take that from me
>Don't you take that from me.

Again the crowd was on its feet, even Kazama was clapping. White Saille had half risen from her seat as she did the same and Saito was clapping with what looked suspiciously like wet eyes.

From the crowds a single male voice could be heard above the rest, calling out like he would during battles, with a strong voice over the din. "Cat," He cried out, "I love you!"

Cat almost dropped her guitar, if it's strap wasn't around her shoulder it would have been on the ground. Both Saito and I face palmed at the same time.

"Souji, I don't think they wanted to be known." Saito said into his mic.

"Wait, what?" Kazama asked, while DJ White Saille just smiled bigger.

"Tell them Saito-san." I instructed, my voice wavering a bit.

"That less familiar name on your lips will be the death of me Ry-chan." Saito told me, ignoring the command. "I pull myself out of the judging for this band. It's a matter of biased opinions. You two will have to decide when the time comes."

"Well I don't know what in the world is going on." Kazama said blankly, "but I did enjoy the song even though it was pretty cheesy. It would have a good market value though."

"I think it's all rather romantic." The DJ said. "The song selection and then the original I mean. Very beautiful."

"Well then," Nathaly said, coming back onstage to usher us off. "One more time for Flowers and Water."

We got back to the green room and away from the sound of the cheers coming from potential fans before my knees gave out. The last thing I needed was conversation and my band understood that, Ferah however didn't get the message.

"That," She said, looking at me in shock, "Was really good. I could feel the emotions on both songs right here." She tapped her chest.

"Don't let her put up a tough act," 14Phantom's pianist called out as she walked up. "Chick was crying."

"Shut it Lyna." Ferah poked the new addition to the conversation in the ribs. "Well Ryane, good luck, and I hope we both showdown at the finals!"

I nodded, still not up to talking with all the emotions running through me.

This was not going to be easy.

* * *

><p>Songs Used:

The Promise by Framing Hanley

And I know its not a song, but the poem the band derived their names from was written by Okita Souji shortly before he died to tuberculosis. I mentioned that before but incase you forgot or something :)

27. Sen's Story: LastLivingVampire

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 26<p>

~Sen's Story; LastLivingVampire~

Umarekawaru:

The first day of contestants went by without much fanfare. Many bands

were not allowed a second song and Kazama had yet to positively comment on any band aside from Flowers and Water.

Chizuru had wanted to go down to the judges table and make sure Saito was holding up okay after the revelation of Ryane's participation in the show, but upon Souji's observation she realized how 'alright' the left handed swordsman was.

However, none of the events that day seemed shocking to the young Oni girl past that one performance until after the show. It was then, when the crowds around her were slowly leaving and heading home that a slight, young looking woman who seemed very familiar seemed to appear out of nowhere before her.

"Chizuru!" The woman gasped, like she was seeing an oasis in the heat of a vast desert.

"Sen-hime?" The woman in front of her nodded slowly as if afraid her friend would disappear from in front of her at any moment. Dropping all hesitation and pretense Chizuru uncharacteristically wrapped her arms around her old friend in a quick embrace. Harada, who had been standing beside the band's manager tapped her on the shoulder and gestured to the exit they had been milling towards now that the people surrounding them had gone off in their own directions.

"Why don't you guys go out for something sweet and talk?" He suggested. "I doubt they have dango nearby but I hear cheesecake is quite good."

"Is that okay with you, Sen-hime?" Chizuru asked, and again the other Oni nodded.

"Yeah, I would really like that." She said.

It took a minute to find a cafe but the two Oni soon found themselves at a cozy corner table in a jazz filled room, two slices of New York Style cheesecake in front of them.

"I... I don't know where to start." Sen-hime began. "After everything that has happened seeing you again... Kazama made it sound like you had died. That you were never coming back. Then to see you on that video clip...Alive, well, surrounded by the Shinsengumi of all people. I called Kazama and finally got an explanation, a real one. I felt so stupid. I had seen the band of them often, how could I miss the reality that you had brought them back?"

Chizuru was unsure of how to answer to that so she asked instead, "How has everything been? Where is Kimigiku?" But she instantly knew she had said something wrong when Sen-hime tensed up and looked away.

"I suppose it is good that you traveled the time as you did. About seventy-five years ago a group of Oni made themselves known to the country of Japan. The humans rose up and killed most of us. I foolishly tried to stay in contact with human kind, but the families I knew turned on me, sold me out. Kimigiku... as a member of the shinobi clan that served my family through the ages, she protected me, got me out. She paid with her life. Since then I have been alone."

"That's horrible..." Chizuru's voice trailed off and again she was unable to think of the right things to say. "Then, with Kazama...and his band, the Oni Complex..."

"At first I thought it would be best to dissuade them." Sen-hime acknowledged. "But this is a different world than it was back then. I doubt the same thing would happen." Chizuru's breath came out in a sigh of relief. "It's getting late. I will walk you back."

Chizuru glanced at the digital clock on the wall across the jazzy room and noted that it was, indeed, rolling towards midnight in the slow way time always worked. The cafe was now empty except for the two Oni girls and a lone waitress cleaning tables.

They bid each other goodbye at Chizuru's hotel room door with plans to meet again soon and Sen-hime's heart felt more lifted than it had in quite a long time.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"Hey, come look at this!" Cat called from by the computer that came with the room.

"Cat's outta the bag." Shukke said with one glance at the screen.

There on Yahoo! News was a picture of our performance and a question of scandal.

"With the premier of America's Band Showdown comes the introduction of many bands from across the nation, but already the competition might be rigged by the appearance of a band who's vocalist and guitarist seem to have a connection to the band Umarekawaru who's own vocalist is a judge for the show. Several fans across many media sights have pinpointed the vocalist of Flowers and Water as the girl who sang with J-born the last night they performed at the Ten Ugly Battles last year and therefore as the mystery girl associated with the song Be Somebody." I read out loud.

"How are people reacting to this?" Stacy asked from where she sat on the couch. "I am sure plenty of people will have commented on any YouTube videos up."

As first our version of Be Somebody and then our song played Cat read over the various comments people had left on the video.

"Well," she said, "I would say about seventy-five percent of the people here are fans already. Ten percent seem to think we are money grabbing attention seeking whores with no business on the show and the other fifteen are just curious as to why we are doing this."

"Wow, seventy-five percent?" I asked, shocked.

"It seems we even have fans fighting for us, telling the ten percent to shut up." Shukke said from where she leaned in on Cat's other side. Having gotten the information she needed, the drummer slapped our friend's manicured fingers away from the mouse and closed down

the internet explorer page we were viewing.

"We still have to go to the show and watch the last twenty bands, even though we have already performed." She informed us, very much like a mother would a disobedient child, as Cat began to complain.

That's right, we had to go back to the green room.

The drive to the auditorium the show was being filmed in was slow and tedious. Every few seconds the cars around us would slow to a stop and people would swarm around the traffic on their way to whatever destination they had in mind. And at just about every stop we had people taking pictures of the bus or pounding on it or shouting whether it be positive or negative things depended on the person. Shukke was driving though so whenever things got too hectic and traffic was moving but we were stuck she would gently tap the gas to get people moving.

"Don't hit anyone, Shukke!" Cat yelled from her seat close to the middle.

"Aw, come on just a little tap?" Stacy frowned at the drummer's tease but I laughed readily enough.

We managed to get a parking spot in the alley connected to the auditorium's backstage and flashed our passes to get let in at the security guard blocked door.

"Nice ride," one of the beefed up men told us as we walked in.

I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not, but Shukke just thanked him with a "I painted it myself" and a thumbs up. The guy did look impressed. Putting that behind us and walking into the sticky atmosphere of the green room was not a desirable moment but we had to be in there. It was like all the other bands knew about Yahoo! News featuring us on the headlines instead of the show as a whole. Did they all think it was a set up? Did they all think it was rigged and that nothing they did would matter? Was that why they seemed to be glaring at us?

Shukke just walked over to the beverage cooler and pulled four waters out, handing one to each of us and keeping one for herself. Sometime later Ferah and her pianist Lyna walked over.

"Tough luck huh, Ryane?" the other vocalist said loudly. "It's like these fools don't know when the media is starting shit for more views." There was a low grumbling rumble amongst the participents at that.

"Yeah," Lyna said in a casually loud voice. "It's like they wouldn't use this course of action themselves if they had to. Everyone in this room would get even instead of being some money grabbing bimbo tramp."

"It's gonna be rigged!" Someone in the crowd shouted. "The fans will vote for them because of their _affiliation_." The word was spit out like it was a disgusting taste in the users mouth.

"Do you honestly think their fans will accept this anymore than you

can?" A familiar sounding man asked from near the T.V. "If they get through to the next round, which, due to their brilliant performance I don't doubt even with two judges voting on them, Flowers and Water will have a harder time than you could imagine. It's not like they got good publicity."

At that moment the broadcast flickered into being on the plasma. "And welcome back to the second night of America's Band Showdown, we listened to thirty bands last night and now we will finish off with the last twenty. Again I would like to introduce our judges: in the middle we have the ever pleasant and smiling DJ White Saille! To the right sits the proud and indominable Kazama of the Oni Complex. And finally our left side judge is the left handed sword wielder with the love song worthy voice, Hajime Saito of Umarekawaru. I, of course, am your host, Nathaly. Now to start things up, from Clayton, North Carolina, give it up for LastLivingVampire!"

"That's us!" The familiar voice called out, "Come on Crow."

"Crow..." I muttered. That was so familiar, that voice saying that name. But before I could ask, they were gone along with two others.

"Yo," the man said once they got on stage with a wave at the judges and then the audience. "Uh, my name is Lanzikai, well not my name, but that's what my friends call me."

"What friends?" The bassist asked in an also familiar voice.

"The wise ass on bass is Crow, our drummer is Vakko and on guitar is Sorin. Again, not our real names." Lanzikai announced. That's how I knew them. "A lot of our friends are here from Darkness Within, make some noise." A whole section of the crowd went nuts and the camera's panned out to them. Several were holding signs.

"Darkness Within..." Saito mumbled. "Where have I heard that? Oh that's right, her name was Hikiri on that game. She was very upset when she had to say goodbye to you all."

"Oi, you can't just say peoples' game names like that, what if she logs on and gets harassed now?" The man I always called Lanz snarked.

"Game names?" DJ asked, confused.

"It's for a game called World of Warcraft." Crow said into his microphone. "Yo, Lanz, let's go. You're wasting time...again."

The crowd laughed as Lanz reached over and slapped his friend. "Well, whatever. We are playing the original first. This is _The Drug I Need_."

_I'm burning the letters you wrote to me in a fire that I will not forget
>I'm saying goodbye in my own way, and turning this love into a hate
There's a sadness I feel with letting go, and wanting something you can never hold
>Forgive me if I'm giving up, but we both know you can't truly hate something you've never loved
_

_I hate the way you bring me down, I hate the things you say to me

>I hate that way you make me feel today, but you're the drug I need

I spent the whole song in shock. It just kept running through my mind that I had no idea Lanz could sing. And he could sing good. Real good. And the song had emotional strength to it. I liked it a lot and so did the crowd. After the song finished the guys of LastLivingVampire stood very still and composed, waiting for the judges to respond.

Kazama was the first to answer. "It was like you took all the elements of a popular song and shoved it down a crap shoot. Everything was so typical, but done at a lower level."

"Well I thought it was good!" DJ White Saille announced with a smile.

"It's the same thing we have heard minus the first two bands and its getting old. This is a waste of time at this point." Kazama shot at her.

"You have been saying that since yesterday yet you still showed up today, Kazama." Saito said softly, his folded hands in front of his mouth hiding his grin.

"What did you think of the band then, Third?" Kazama asked snidely. He had taken to calling Hajime 'Third'. Most people would probably think it was an insult about being the third, least important judge in Kazama's eyes but I knew that it was a reference to Saito being the third division captain of the Shinsengumi.

"I have to disagree with you Kazama," Saito began.

"Of course you do," the Oni judge interrupted caustically.

"I liked the song, though I do think there is room for improvement. The subject material was heartfelt but the vocals didn't quite convey the feeling." Saito continued like he hadn't heard Kazama interject. "I feel to get a more accurate idea of their skill we should allow the second song."

I had decided yesterday that I actually liked that Saito was a judge (aside from when we performed) because it _required_ him to speak his mind. So often he merely conveyed his opinions with a sentence or more often through silence, it was nice to hear what he truly thought clearly.

"Oh, yes," White Saille agreed. "Let's hear the second song!"

"Such a waste of time," Kazama groused as he waved his hand in assent to hearing the cover that LastLivingVampire chose to play.

As my friends played a Michael Jackson cover I listened intently to their music. There was room for improvement but it was still really good. We could improve too so it might turn into a race to see who could get better faster. They finished the song and walked off stage. Lanz and Crow made a bee line for me.

"Yo, Hikiri!" Lanz shouted as soon as he could possibly be heard.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner you dolt?" I asked as he wrapped me in a big bear hug.

Crow answered for him as he came in for a milder hug as well. "We wanted it to be a shock."

"It would have been either way!" I told him seriously. "So who in the guild is here?"

"Everyone who is anyone." Vakko announced with a grin.

"You could have told us you would be here." Lanz said with a frown. "They would have made signs for you too."

"I doubt it, its been like a year." I frowned back at him.

"We all still remember you." Sorin told me. I didn't know if that made me happy or sad.

The rest of the show was spent like a chill night at home. Us girls of Flowers and Water and the boys of LastLivingVampire joked around and had a good time watching the plasma and then 14Phantom came and joined the fun. A lot of the bands around us would glare or pointedly ignore our existence and I think it had something to do with me and Cat and our connection to Umarekawaru. But having those two bands at our side was like a repellent for the negativity around us and we just had fun.

"So uh, Hikiri?" Lanz asked as the night winding down. There were only a few bands who had yet to perform. "Me and my band, the guild and even these cool cats of 14Phantom are going to the bar tonight to celebrate the completion of this round. You ladies should come."

I looked over at Shukke who was texting God knows who, I guessed Shinpachi, and hopefully not planning anything. She glanced up and nodded before speaking. "Sounds fun! We can even take your band and 14Phantom there and to the hotel if you like. The show shoved us all in the same building if I remember correctly."

"If we are driving them, you are so not getting behind the wheel Shukke!" Cat shouted.

"I second that!" Stacy said beside her.

"Of course not, Ryane is the perma-sober one. She will drive." I felt so conned at that moment.

"Wait, do you have a tour bus or something?" Lanz asked.

To which I replied, "Of course not."

While Shukke smiled and said, "Something like that."

"And that's all for tonight!" Nathaly was saying on the plasma. "We will be back on tomorrow and the judges will have picked their top twenty-five bands. But it doesn't end there. We need you at home to

vote online or by phone for your top ten bands. You will be choosing the top ten by tomorrow. But be careful! Any votes for a band that isn't picked to be in the top twenty five will be a wasted vote. So good luck to all the bands. Remember, first the top twenty-five will be revealed and then the top ten voted bands of those twenty-five will be announced. The voting lines are open NOW until noon tomorrow! Thank you and good night."

"Wow, the audience is getting involved already?" Crow sounded nervous.

"Well this is gonna be interesting." I tried to sound chipper and positive about it, but in my head all I could think was _Shit just hit the fan._

* * *

><p>Songs Used:

The Drug I Need by Against All Will (LastLivingVampire's Song)

Michael Jackson was mentioned. For anyone curious the song I had in mind was Smooth Criminal...think Alien Ant Farm.

28. The Bar Incident: Those Words

A/N:

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

Chapter 27

* * *

><p>~The Bar Incident; Those Words~<p>

Cat's Point of View:

The bell over the door clanked again and an all too familiar voice drifted to my ears over the general hubbub of the bar.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Shinpachi?" The bespectacled member of Umarekawaru asked in a loud voice.

"She said they would be here. You want to see her right?" The musclebound drummer responded at a volume I had to strain to hear.

"They better be." That voice was about as loud as Shinpachi's but it made me cringe. I couldn't meet him yet. The fourth and final voice replied to that in a bare murmur, and even though I couldn't hear the words, I figured I knew who spoke them. I also figured Shukke would need to sleep with one eye open for a long time.

That sentiment doubled into a certainty when Ryane suddenly swiveled in her seat and found the group of four with roaming eyes. She completed the rotation she was making and downed her bottle of root

beer before grabbing Lanz and heading to the small but crowded dance floor. He looked startled but didn't protest.

I took to looking around the bar at all the members of Ryane's old guild to avoid the fact that Souji was walking over and taking a seat next to me at the counter. Several fans of his were hovering, but it didn't stop him from looking over at me with hungry eyes. He hadn't said anything and he hadn't touched me, but I felt it was safe to add a 'yet' to both of those seemingly temporary situations.

When he did speak, it was in that dangerously quiet way of his. A way that seemed a lot more frightening than a shout. "You're not wearing it."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what he was talking about and, being far from stupid, I replied without having to ask for clarification. "Your sword is somewhere safe."

"So you care enough to keep it safe?" His question irritated me enough to give a short tempered reply.

"I'm surprised you didn't just assume as much." I spat the comment out with more venom then I intended. I wasn't as mad at Souji as Ryane seemed to be at Saito, but I still had my pride.

"You're the one keen on cutting my head off. Don't you think it would be unreasonable to assume anything?" He asked with a snort. I guess he had a point. About that time I looked over to see Lanz getting a little too grabby for my tastes with my band mate and I got up to deal with it. I didn't factor Saito into the mix though.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"Lanz, watch your hands..." I complained slightly over the music, trying not to be too loud.

"Why," He asked, sounding genuinely confused. "It's not like your seeing anyone."

Okay I give him that, but, "Trust me on this Lanz, hands off okay?"

"What, is it cause that one judge is watching? What went on between you two?" And, now he was getting on my nerves. I tried to step away, but the vocalist of LastLivingVampire just held me closer and then it was too late to prevent anything.

"I think the lady wanted to leave." His voice was colder then I had heard it in a long time. I think the last time he was this expressionless was in the anime I first saw him in.

"I don't see how its any of your business," Lanz seethed.

"You wouldn't," Saito said softly. "Ry-chan, I would like a word-"

"Ry-chan? What the fuck is that, her name is Ryane or Hikiri. Don't go giving people weird nicknames." Lanz interrupted.

"I am no longer talking to you, boy." His voice now had a hint of anger to it and it kind of scared me. Not for my sake, Saito would never harm me, of that I was certain. But he had no such compunctions about hurting my friend.

"Boy?" Lanz shouted, gaining the attention of everyone in the bar. I saw Cat standing beside her seat next to Okita at the bar, and him subsequently forcing her back into the stool with a hand on her shoulder. "Dude, I was in the military. I have seen things you can't even begin to understand. Walking around with that fake ass sword on your hip. You think you're so cool. You are a sham."

"Not good," I muttered. I saw Saito's hand go to the hilt of his sword and felt a strong pain seeing both of his weapons together.

"I have _done _things with this sword that are beyond anyone's comprehension. Perhaps I should show you?" There was no more anger in his voice, just a cold darkness that reflected in his blue eyes.

"Don't." My voice came out in a quiet command that sounded more like a timid request, but he hesitated.

"Oh, hey!" A familiar voice cut through the tense silence carelessly; as If he were truly unaware of the dangerous situation Lanzikai was in. "You're that guy from the Christmas party last year. Still clinging to Hikiri like she is somehow desirable, huh?"

"Ruldy," I tried to get the warning out but before I could speak more Saito's blade was unsheathed and placed still as stone against the flesh of Ruldy's neck. "Saito."

The purple head sighed at that and removed his weapon from my old crushes throat. "Still that unfamiliar name?" He asked in a sad way.

"I am still upset with you," I asserted. Again he gave a short sigh and sheathed his sword. "Thank you." I said in response to the action.

Now that the situation seemed defused quite a few fans were gravitating towards him. He said he needed a word with me but I figured he meant in private. So thinking I did owe him an explanation I roughly brushed past him as a group of girls descended. In the moment we were touching I dropped something into his coat pocket.

"If you really want to talk, use that tonight." I muttered to him as I walked away with Lanz in tow. The next move was on him. Catching Shukke's eye as she laughed at something Shinpachi was saying, her left hand on his thigh, I held the keys to the bus up with a raised brow. Nodding at me, she turned to her companion and said something softly before standing up and weaving her way towards me and my friend. The other drummer followed her.

Next I spotted Cat. Souji was still beside her, but they looked like they had reached an agreement to talk no further until they were free of the mewling girls' presence.

"Cat!" I called, "Start rounding people up will ya?"

She smiled and then shouted, "Any of you tards who rode with us and don't want to pay for a taxi, let's go! We are leaving."

All three bands along with Shinpachi, Sannan and Souji met outside.

"Um..." I pointed at the three men questioningly but Shukke just shrugged, Cat looked away, and Stacy had a blush that would make her Irish ancestors proud.

The members of 14Phantom and LastLivingVampire looked completely confused until Ferah broke the ice. "So you were all dating members of J-born?" She queried casually.

"Not quite" Sannan answered, pushing his glasses higher on his nose and Shinpachi elbowed him in the ribs and said, "Not yet."

While that seemed to confuse Crow the others took it in stride and everyone piled on the bus. It was a bit uncomfortable but we somehow managed to fit all fifteen people on board the short bus. Surveying the group I saw Shinpachi's arm around our drummer and smiled. Looking further along the left side of the bus, Stacy and Sannan were holding hands.

* * *

><p>Stacy's Point of View:<p>

As we sat down next to each other on the bus Sannan and I held hands. I am not sure if I grabbed his hand or vice versa, but I thought it was nice. We had talked the whole time at the bar, he had even ignored the fan girls that were hounding him as we chatted about this and that. It was refreshing to be able to geek out with someone and not worry that I was being weird. He, however, looked rather uncomfortable. "I'm sorry," I tendered. "Did I...?"

"No," He said a bit distractedly. "I took your hand, but is it alright to do so?"

I was surprised by the question before I remembered that he wasn't actually from this time and that something like this might seem different to him than it did to me. "Why not?" I asked, curious to know what it could mean for him.

He pushed his glasses up with his spare hand before replying. "Where I come from it would be laying claim to you. It's rather forward."

I smiled reassuringly before asking, "Where you come from, or when you come from?" That startled him.

"You know?" He sounded shocked. "And still you would hold my hand, knowing when I come from and what I have done?" The car was stopped in traffic but everyone else was talking over us so it was a safe enough place to have a talk about the past.

Entwining our fingers I explained. "To be honest, when the girls first told me, after the moment of disbelief I thought of you guys as monsters." He seemed to droop at this but I wasn't done talking.

"That was before I met you at the masquerade. And then... talking to you so casually, about butterflies of all things, I couldn't think that way anymore. Cat warned me not to fall in love with any of you, you know."

"I hope you will be willing to disregard her advice in my case, Stacy-san." I smiled at that. He was trying to sound cool.

"Only if you can bring yourself to just call me Stacy, Sannan." I told him casually. Two could play at that game.

"By all means Stacy. Though, when its just the two of us, my name is Keisuke Yamanami."

"Then why do they call you Sannan?" I was confused at that, so I let him win and turned geek first.

"Sannan is another, alternate way to read my surname when written in kanji. I would rather not have fans call me something so familiar though, so please, just between us." His smile was radiant if a little sad, and I felt warmth radiating from our clasped hands, up my arm and into my heart.

"I'll keep it secret." I promised as the bus rolled into the parking garage under our hotel. It barely cleared the height restriction. We got off the bus last and walked into the hotel holding hands. Several fans of each band seemed to be waiting and we got swamped he let go of my hand with a sad smile and went to take pictures with a pair of girls with Rhodes Island tees on.

It wasn't an auspicious or dramatic start to a relationship but for me, it was better this way.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"Someone is in here..." Shukke looked at the lights, which were on and tried to herd us all back outside.

"Relax Shukke." I told her calmly.

"You didn't!" She half shrieked, losing her cool. "He's a judge!"

"We are only going to be talking." I told her calmly, "Or do you think we need a chaperone?"

"I think you need a condom," Cat said jokingly.

"Funny." I quipped. "Have some faith in me Shukke And don't listen in either."

With that I walked into my room and shut the door, dropping the cool act. I took a deep breath and would have turned to look for Saito but he was already there, pressing me against the door, he lips on mine in a passionate kiss that was causing me to lose my senses.

He pulled away and I shakely began to say, "Sai-" but before I could get the words out he was kissing me again, still firmly holding me to

the door. His tongue brushed against my lips several times, but I refused to let him in. Again he pulled away and again I tried to call him by his surname. This time before he began kissing me he growled.

"Not by that name." He half snarled. There was anger in his voice, but also so much pain I felt tears spring to my eyes. "Please."

He was begging. I didn't want him reduced to that.

"You said you wouldn't ask for me to forgive you that night." I reminded him shaking all over.

"I didn't think your anger would hurt so much. I have recieved a lot of wounds, Ry-chan. You have seen some of the scars, traced them with your fingertips. Nothing has hurt like this before." His words made me hurt and upon seeing my pained expression he kissed me again. Not in the lip bruising manner of the past two kisses, but in a tender apology.

He placed my arms, which he had been restraining, around his waist as this kiss deepened and he pulled me close. Without consciously deciding to, I began to return his kiss. "Ry-chan." He whispered as he pulled away, knowing instinctively that he had won.

"Ha-" I began, but I couldn't, not till I knew. "Why?" He remained silent so I asked more, "Were you testing me?"

"No." He denied it forcefully.

"Were you tired of me?"

"NO!" Even more forceful.

"Then why did you do it? And if it hurt so bad why did you continue to deny me for so long?" I really was trying not to cry, but the tears came anyway.

"At first, Souji and I wanted to rebel against the manager that tore you two away from us. We didn't want to believe that the fans we were gaining would hurt either of you, but he was quite adament in that. He told us you would be in danger. Still we tried to fight it, but Hijikata... he said it was an order. Never have I ever disobeyed an order. If the same thing were to happen again, I would."

"You thought I was in danger?" I asked softly. When he nodded I snorted softly, "Baka! A broken heart is more dangerous then broken bones or broken flesh. Why didn't you just tell me? I could have looked after myself."

"Shukke." That one word was really starting to piss me off.

"The plan. Right." I was gonna have words with her.

"I can't stay much longer Ry-chan, so please..." Again with a tender kiss he begged me to say his name to him. I nibbled at his lower lip and he pulled away somewhat shocked.

"I can't call you by your name on the show. And I cannot act like I have forgiven you yet. But know this, if you _ever_ pull something

like this again...I will kill you with your own sword." Standing on the tips of my toes I whispered in his ear, "Good night. I love you, Hajime."

He pulled away from me and looked me in the eye, all the darkness gone from those azures. I knew he was about to respond in kind but Shukke busted in and told him to leave.

"There are fans outside our door who want to talk to Ryane, so use the fire escape." She told him serenely. And so just as abruptly as everything had started things ended and Hajime was gone.

Shukke stood in my room with a smug look on her face as she took in the light bruising on my lips and arms. "Hmm, he really did a number on you huh?"

"Oh shit, I can't meet fans like this!" I exclaimed as I brought a still shaking hand to my lips and looked at the marks on my arms.

"Good thing I lied then." Shukke said merrily. I could have hit her. Cat did for me. "What the hell Cat?"

"I told you not to interrupt that boy." She thwacked our drummer again.

"What happened to not listening?" I barked, pissed.

Stacy came in yawning. "We should get some sleep before the sun comes up." She said with a small smile.

I could kill them all. But I wouldn't. If I went to jail how would I hear those words from him.

29. Audience Choices: Paper Moon

A/N: I keep forgetting to say it and for that I apologize but the latest bands are named thusly:

LastLivingVampire is named after the reviewer of the same penname, thank you so much for staying tuned to the story.

It Will Be Glorious is named for a guild on my server on World of Warcraft. I don't really have any ties to them...I just like the name.

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 29<p>

~Audience Choices; Paper Moon ~

Somehow, after the host of the show had culled the twenty-five judge favorites, we were still standing. We had been called late in the rankings, but surprisingly we were not last. Apparently only 14Phantom got full judge approval. The rest of the bands got two

judge votes. The only startling thing was that we, Flowers and Water, were the only ones that got a positive vote from both DJ White Saille and Kazama. Hajime, true to his word, did not vote either way for the band.

The judges mouthed off after each band was announced and of course, Kazama usually had something negative to say, if anything at all. When we were called he didn't hold his tongue.

"I expect good things from you ladies. I refuse to believe you are here to dog men that are no better than hounds themselves; though the media seems to think otherwise. Most people here are of one of two opinions of you. That you are here to get revenge on your lovers or that you are going to be some sappy love story. I think you are here with something to prove and my gut, which is almost infallible, is telling me it is _not _that you are worthy of the men you love, but rather that you are worth a record deal. Prove me right."

DJ White Saille had looked at him funny for this and several female fans of Umarekawaru booed when the Oni called Hajime and Okita no better than hounds but once the crowd calmed down a little Hajime spoke. He looked right at me with a cocky smirk that I was pretty sure Okita had to train him in. "Whether they are here for revenge or romance, they better come fast and hard and not screw up. The members of Umarekawaru have one thing to say, and that includes myself, 'Come at us with death in your eyes, it's the only way you can hope to defeat us.'" And again the female fans responded, this time with screams and cheers.

With the microphone in our hands that most bands had just said 'thank you' into Shukke responded, "You won't even see it coming." The girls booed but several hundred men cat called and cheered instead.

Now we played a second round of the waiting game as Nathaly stood center stage and began the audience choice round. "Welcome back from that short commercial break. Standing on the left stage are twenty-five hopeful bands waiting to see if they have been put through to the next round by you, the audience. If you voted for a band that is not amongst the judge picks there is not much I can tell you except that your votes for those bands no longer count. Now! This will be in no particular order. Of the top twenty-five the judges chose I will call ten bands. Each band will have two minutes to introduce themselves and tell us a couple things about the band. Your first chosen band, in no particular order is,

"14Phantom!" There was a lot of cheering as Ferah and her band ran to the center stage and grabbed the mic from Nathaly. Ferah became the spokesperson and gave her address in a hurried manner.

"Hi we are 14Phantom of Greece, New York. We bring full flavor to our music and are here to rock your world. This time we will win, no questions asked, no answers needed. Thank you for your votes and your support." She jumped up and down with double peace signs before handing the mic back to Nathaly.

"Alright, second to come to center stage is: LastLivingVampire." More cheers. More fanfare. More speeches. Down the list it went, Nathaly calling out band after band. There were sixteen of us left at that point. Most bands were holding hands and praying. Some people looked ready to cry. Some were crying. Nathaly had a knack for going to

commercial breaks at high tension points it seemed because she went to one right after the ninth band was called.

"Welcome back, and now, the last band to go to the competition rounds based on viewer votes isâ€¦Flowers and Water."

The crowd was cheering, so it shouldn't matter, but the bands we left behind made sounds of disbelief and anger. They still thought it was rigged and no matter what anyone would say, they would most likely always believe that. Maybe it contributed to the conspiracy but we didn't jump and scream. We didn't run to the center stage. We didn't hug each other. We certainly didn't hug Nathaly. We just walked calmly to where the host stood, bowed low to the cheering crowd and accepted the microphone.

"Hi, we are Flowers and Water." Shukke said into the mic. "We are not going to be telling you why we are here right now." The crowd silenced. "That would take longer than two minutes and those of you who doubt our intentions or have come up with some fancy story on your own will not believe our words."

She handed the microphone to me and I said, "As for this competition being rigged, believe what you like. But if you go to YouTube like we did and see the comments on our performanceâ€¦. I doubt that can be faked." I handed the mic to Cat.

"And all you idiots out there shoved so full of stupid you can'tâ€¦" She began before Stacy hastily snatched the microphone away.

"What she means is 'please vote for us and look forward to what we can show you.'" Stacy recovered smoothly while beside her Cat yelled, "That is _not_ what I meant and you know it." Thankfully the crowd just laughed as we walked off the stage. It was clear we were bickering the whole way but Nathaly was in control of the mic again so no one could hear us.

"I'm just doing me!" Cat announced loudly as we entered the backstage area the rest of the accepted bands had been removed to. "And anyway how are you gonna grab the mic from me Stacyâ€¦I wasn't done yet." Someone further in shushed her. "Aw hell no. Who shushed me?"

Seeing that things were going to get a little crazy without intervention, Shukke smacked her on the back of the head and glared at her until she calmed down. Around this time we heard the plasma t.v. that we hadn't noticed.

"And there you have it. Your top ten. As for how the battles work, each week each remaining band will play one song. Sometimes there will be a mandatory challenge. The bands won't know when they are coming or what type of challenge it can be. So look forward to spontaneously created songs that can fit the themes we put them up to. To start things off we will have a bi-lingual challenge. Each Band will create a song with at least part of their lyrics in another language."

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

The cameras were no longer rolling and the crowds were dispersing

while the judges still sat in their seats. DJ White Saille was the first to stand and walk away leaving the two rival band members alone together once the audience was completely gone.

"Saito Hajime, Captain of the Third Unit of the Shinsengumi." Kazama drawled as if the title was dirt.

"Oni Choshu scum." Hajime returned with just as much distain.

"Have you always been this much of a moron? Or does that girl fog your senses." Kazama's face was marred by a sneer. "It's not normally something I get involved in, human squabbling. They have their own reasons to be famous, whether it has anything to do with the Shinsengumi or not I don't know. It doesn't matter to me. I am only telling you to let them find their dream because it will cause you angst. But even saying so, you know you have to let them try."

Hajime met his words with a stoic expression reminiscent of his time during the Bakumatsu, "Why do you bother bringing it up then?"

"Because if she goes on stage with bruised lips again I won't play stupid. It's just too much fun playing with fragile human emotions, after all." Kazama answered nonchalantly. Hajime put his hand on the hilt of his katana but the Oni judge just took a _step_ back off the judges' stand. "No need to be violent Saito Hajime. The world doesn't work that way anymore." And with that he was gone.

Okita, who had gone to look for his best friend when he was late coming out of the auditorium, heard the threat and grimaced before walking over to Saito. Leaning against the raised dais the judges sat on top of he said the only thing he could think to say. "Guess we have to wait huh?"

"I don't think I will be able to be near her without losing control." Hajime admitted quietly.

"Then stay away." The answer came out short and bitter.

"She's going to kill me." Hajime said, but the words held acceptance in that being what he had to do.

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

I had a feeling that the competition would have a challenge dealing with language and had been fearing it. Ryane took sign language in high school. Sign Language! You can't sing sign language. She knew no other languages. This meant that I had to translate a song into a language I knew and teach her the words and pronunciations. We could just translate a couple words, but that felt cheap and I cringed to think how it would make us look.

Of course the only language I knew with any fluency was Japanese. I was afraid that, this early in the competition, everyone and their mother would be trying to use Saito and Kazama's native tongue. The judges were just for guiding remarks but in a challenge where most people would not understand all your lyrics it was hard to not go for

the positive criticism.

And of course knowing that both those judges actually were born and raised in Japan, regardless of the era, I was wary. It would look really bad if our vocalist mispronounced something. Having considered all this, there wasn't much choice. Thank God for thinking ahead.

"So, Ryane, that song I have been teaching youâ€¦it will work right?" Ryane whipped around where we sat in the hotel room after the show and looked at me slightly terrified. I guess my intimidating voice was getting better. That one practically screamed 'it had better'.

When she finally responded I felt relieved. "Yeah, we can practice it now if you like. Just keep the amps low."

We worked for hours but by the time we all went to our own dreamlands I felt comfortable with our song. It would be our only easy gig this whole competition, I was sure of it.

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

"Wow, well," Kazama said while pretending to pick at his nails. "That was the fourth, wait no, fifth band that has _tried_ to sing Japanese. And like the others before it, you were absolutely horrendous. You obviously patched some phrases and words into your song that at some times did not even _go_ where you put them."

"I cannot stress how much I hate agreeing with Kazama," Saito was saying into the mic at the band standing on stage, "And I really hate that you guys are making it impossible for me to do otherwise. You had five days. I know it's not a lot of time to compose and write let alone translate. I get it. But that was not good."

DJ White Saille just shrugged and Kazama could not help but ponder at why such a useless human was on the same panel as him. Granted she was much more helpful when a band chose Spanish or in that one case French to use as their challenge language but that didn't really change his opinion of her being a twit.

"Give another round of applause for It Will Be Glorious." Nathaly, another pointless waste of existence as far as the blonde Oni was concerned, called into her microphone as she walked back on stage. "Up next we have Flowers and Water. Take it away girls!"

The four members of the all-girl band walked out amidst cheers and took position. They were wearing matching checkered fitted tee-shirts and tastefully ripped jeans. The vocalist had fingerless gloves that reached to her elbows. "Hey, Flowers and Water here. Gonna give you a dose of Japanese done right." She said energetically into her microphone. "This is Paper Moon!"

Her introduction was followed by a pretty wicked instrumental before the vocalist began to sing. And as she sang, Kazama began to translate the lyrics in his head.

_I'm Falling Down Into My Shadow

>_and hold my breath because what's waiting is a __Deadly Night.__
>Don't scary, the witch just drew a pumpkin carriage and

>is only reflected in your eyes._

_See you in your dreams. Yeah Baby,
>_Even if they are nightmares._

_Fairy Blue__, for you, I shatter the stars
>and use them to adorn the __Black Paper Moon.

>_Because you believed in me, __when you're lost, here I am

>Forever with your soul.
__If I look up, you shine like the moon._

It was a surprisingly endearing song. Again, cheesier then the Oni was hoping for but it had a certain charm as far as human creations go.

_I didn't want to believe in anyone, there was a time I was mean,

>but even so, your words have always resounded in my heart.

_Fairy Blue,__ for you, I shatter the stars and adorn the signs.

>When you lose sight of your dreams and get confused,
please raise your head._

_Fairy Blue__ you gave me proof to live, a bond called confidence._

You aren't alone,
>When you're lost here I am
Forever with your soul

>_because you finally trust in me!_

The guitar played out at the end of the song and Kazama listened to the applause befoe taking control of the commenting process again. "Finally. Proper Japanese. But again with the sappy lyrics. I feel like if I were to cut you you would bleed rainbows and sugar water." He snarked.

"Well I didn't understand the lyrics but it had a positive melody. Very stirring." The woman beside him said in that way too happy tone that made him want to rip out her spinal cord.

"I believe translations for all the songs will be on the CBS website after the show." The Third said calmly. "Having understood it, who did you write it for? You don't seem the sort to spout nonsense."

"Jealous it's not for you, Saito?" The dark skinned one said while she plucked imaginary dust off her guitar. The drummer threw a drumstick at the girl's head.

"Actually it's for the other members of this band. They have really changed my life you know. They lift me up and I wanted them to know

that if they ever lose sight I will do the same for them." The vocalist said looking from her right where the guitarist stood to her left at her bassist and then back at the drummer.

"Kami save me, I think I am going to be sick." Kazama sneered.

"I would have thought Oni didn't get sick." The guitarist quipped and earned another drumstick to the head. Kazama just smirked as the girls got their signal to go backstage.

These girls are interesting.

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Paper Moon by Tommy Heavenly6 (Flowers and Water's song [The underlined words are originally in Japanese.])

30. I'm Sorry: Stay Close

**A/N: **

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 29<p>

~I'm Sorry; Stay Close~

Friday night came swiftly for me and the girls in our agitated states. It was nerve-wrecking and I didn't know what to expect as far as voting was concerned. I knew Stacy and Cat felt the same, but Shukke seemed calm and collected from the get go. And as the two days passed she didn't seem to feel any pressure. After the judgment day passed for this week she decided to share why she was so calm.

And so we sat at the computer in our hotel room looking over site after site critiquing us and praising us. There were several discussions about our relations with Umarekawaru which she quickly ignored in favor of threads that really spoke on how we were seen as a band.

"_After having seen the lyrics on CBS's website I have to agree with Kazama. It's an incredibly cheesy song with too much happy feeling in it. They need to get in touch with a darker feeling. I mean it's all well and good that she appreciates her band, but Ryane can come up with much better material as she proved in the audition round."_

"_I disagree! I thought it was a great song. You could enjoy it without needing to know the lyrics and that's really what matters in a song written in a different language. I wanna hear what they do in the next round. Background track right?"_

That was another matter. Another challenge had been issued right off the bat after It Will Be Glorious was voted off. This time the judges passed out different sealed envelopes to the nine remaining

bands.

"In those envelopes are different background tracks. You will create a song with the track you received. You must incorporate your own instrumentation into the song. Those are the rules. Now get out of here." Kazama had announced with a wave of his hand.

"This one blogger says he wants to marry you, Ryane." She called from the hotel computer, catching my attention.

"Tell him to divide by zero first." Cat shouted from the couch with a chuckle.

"You should Google him to make sure he isn't a stalker or a criminal or something, just to be safe." Stacy said from next to the drummer as she reached for the mouse. Shukke slapped her hand when she got close causing our bassist to yelp.

"He won't get near her and everyone already pointed out that he doesn't stand a chance. See read this response." Shukke turned the screen a bit for the strawberry blonde to see.

"'Yeah right, we all know she is taken even if they won't admit it.'" Stacy read.

"And this oneâ€¦" Shukke commanded.

"'I know right, I mean they look at each other like the other is their life but we are supposed to believe there is nothing there?'"

"And here tooâ€¦" Shukke pointed.

"'Stacy on the other hand is a fine piece of ass. I bet she couldâ€¦.' Oh God, that's disgusting!" Stacy shouted while Shukke laughed. "You made me read that on purpose!"

"They get quite bold sometimes. They are not aware that we read this." Shukke said while continuing to laugh. Stacy shuddered. "Still wanna Google people?"

The newest member to the family shook her head vigorously. "Distance." She said firmly. "Lots of distance."

We laughed for a bit, but to be honest my high was brought down quite a bit. I didn't think I was being that obvious with the way I looked at Hajime. It wasn't something I could really help though.

"Say, Shukke?" I nudged my friend.

"Hmm?" She ineloquently responded.

"What are people saying about me and Hajime?" I wanted to steel myself for whatever might come of the fans reactions to those stolen stares that were clearly very noticeable.

"Don't worry about that." She didn't seem to want to tell me which either meant it was all fine or it was really bad. I wasn't sure which. "We will have to come clean eventually, about everything. I want to wait until they admit the time travel bit isn't a gimmick but

we might not be able to. In that case we will skirt the details a bit."

"Yeah, like people would believe us anyway," Cat agreed.

"More like it's not our place to bust them." Shukke said in a lecturing tone.

"I wonder if they will ever admit it," Stacy sounded a little sad and when I enquired she continued, "It's just something Sannan said. He told me it isn't easy for them to form bonds because right now their lives are lies. It seems very lonely."

"Speaking of Sannan, you two were getting pretty close on the bus that one time. Holding hands and everything." Cat teased.

"No closer than you and Souji." Stacy countered.

"That's different. Me and Souji are-" she paused there.

"Are what?" I goaded mercilessly.

"There is history between us." Cat evaded.

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiight." The three of us drawled together before bursting into laughter at Cat's expense. After a moment she launched off the couch to tackle us where we sat at the computer.

Much later that night Shukke's phone went off as the rest of us were falling asleep. Curious as I was I just wanted to go to sleep so I forced myself to ignore the steady message received tones coming from the room next to me.

* * *

><p>Shukke's Point of View:<p>

_I am coming over. _

I wasn't really one of those kinds of girls to get butterflies or be any type of anxious around guys no matter how amazing they seemed. Every guy had flaws whether obvious or hidden. There was no such thing as the perfect man. But just this once, knowing that Shinpachi would be here soon had me feeling like I was on a roller coaster about to plummet down that first incredibly high drop.

It didn't make sense. We weren't dating or anything. I mean we flirted here and there but that was just for fun. I never considered him serious and I don't think he thought I was either. But a small part of my mind whispered, _then why is he coming over just for those two words._

'I'm sorry'. That is what I sent him. For those two words he was coming over.

There was a soft knock on the door leading out of the suite and I found myself bolting to it. I didn't want to deal with the other girls knowing Shinpachi was here.

So, of course, when I opened the door he took a long glance at my

pajamas and slippers and the sleeping hat I wore to control my hair askew on the top of my head and he laughed.

"You could have told me not to come if you were going to sleep." He said in his typical jolly tone.

"Shhhh! The other girls are sleeping." I responded. "And I am fully aware of my options."

That sobered him. "Of course you are. I don't think there is much you are unaware of Shukke." His tone was colder than I would have liked, but he didn't sound thoroughly pissed so I figured I could work with it.

"I am unaware of why you came over after I apologized." I told him only to have him raise a brow. "No, really. Though I suppose I should be feeling like an idiot if you are acting like it is so obvious."

"Then you have no idea how Iâ€¦ and all this time youâ€¦ and then at the bar we wereâ€¦" He was stammering like an idiot and jumbling his sentences in his haste to communicate the pieces I had been missing but it was enough.

I felt my eyes widen at his crestfallen expression. _He thinks I don'tâ€¦.but heâ€¦.and that meansâ€¦_ Great now I was doing it.

To shut my disconnected thoughts up and to try to clear up the misunderstanding in the quickest way possible, I did the only thing my scattered brain could think to tell me to. I kissed him. Our lips were still connected when someone cleared their throat to my left.

"Uhâ€¦Shukke?" Ryane sounded amused. "Why, exactly, are you kissing Shinpachi in the living room at three in the morning?"

"Don't you worry about it Bell-san." Shinpachi told her before picking me up, spinning me in a half circle and carrying me backwards towards my room.

"It's just Ryane." I heard her correct but he just grinned and shut the door with his foot.

Half throwing me on the bed he kicked his shoes off and took off his shirt.

"You move fast." I commented dryly.

"And what exactly do you think we are doing?" He sounded a little too full of himself but just this once I decided I wouldn't knock him down a peg or two.

"What did you have in mind?" I purred only to laugh heartily as I heard Ryane's music start blaring from her room.

"Well since she is being so accommodating," He chuckled, "Try not to be too loud."

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

Shinpachi came back into the hotel suite with a little too much pep in his step and a little too big of a grin considering he had just gone to talk to Shukke. It set the whole band to wondering until Harada broke through that 'don't ask don't tell' wall.

"No need to be so obvious dude. Especially when some of us actually can't get laid." He scoffed.

"Hey, isn't it a little insensitive to be bringing _that_ up?" Heisuke asked from the ottoman he was sitting on across the room. Both Okita and Saito looked over at him with varying degrees of hostility for rubbing salt in the wound.

"I was talking about you, Heisuke." Sano covered smoothly.

"Huh?" The young man asked confused while Chizuru blushed deeper and deeper with every passing moment. Hijikata was nowhere to be seen at least.

"You're too young to have any relations with your fans."

"Waitâ€¦ what? Am not!" He stammered.

"The hassles and troubles of being Jailbait." Shinpachi teased, joining in the fun.

"Well how the hell does anyone go from asking for an explanation to an apology to slee-" Heisuke was cut off by a fist to the back of his head as Hijikata opened the door to his room, heard the conversation, saw how distressed Chizuru was and punched him. "OW!"

"Chizuru is in the room you idiot!" He growled causing all the others to look over at the quiet but fidgeting Oni girl in shock.

After they all muttered their apologies and bowed in her direction the vice commander sized Shinpachi up and said sternly, "You will keep your dalliances to yourself."

"I know I know." The drummer replied, waving his hand about airily, a huge grin still on his face.

"We have an interview tomorrow. It is going to be a joint effort with The Oni Complex." Kondou came into the room with that news and it silenced the band completely.

"How'd you manage that, Kondou-san?" Souji asked cheekily.

"What will the topic be?" Saito asked right after him. "Will we finally talk about that?"

"If Kazama and the other Oni don't dodge the subtle hints I will be dropping about being open about it then yes. I don't feel we have a strong enough advantage to force it out of them. We have to be careful." Kondou said firmly.

"And of course they will weasel out of it." Souji snarked, clearly with a poor opinion of the men in question.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

Shukke really was a piece of work but we had an assignment to write and she was becoming quite the slave driver about it. Not that I minded really. Anything to get last night out of my head.

"Now play it with the track we got!" She had a right to work us hard. We were late this week. We would be live in about five hours and we were still working out last minute kinks. But my mind was elsewhere.

Two nights ago Shinpachi had spent the night with Shukke. I couldn't hear what they were doing due to music blaring from my IPod dock and quite frankly I didn't _want_ to hear anything. Anyway I went to sleep oblivious and woke up to a very perky Shukke so Lord only knows. Last night though. We ran into the rest of Umarekawaru at a restaurant, which I am pretty sure Shukke planned since she was the one so keen to eat out randomly.

Saito was there, but when he saw me he walked straight past me and out the door. So we were back to this again. In a rage I followed him out of the diner and down the street. When no one was around he turned to me and the look in his eye was so feral and so caged at the same time that it stopped me in my tracks.

"We can't be seen together. Not right now. Not yet." He told me, his voice low and angry. I couldn't tell if he was mad at me or someone else but he seemed to be unraveling. "Just rememberâ€¦ You're the one who wanted this."

And he had walked away, his hand on the hilt of his short sword like it was an anchor. It hit me then, how hard it must be to have that constant reminder on his person that I had given up. But back then I hadn't understood. Now I did at least a little, but as I went to follow him again a voice at my back stopped me.

"He's doing it for you." Okita sounded as playful as always but I could tell he was frustrated with something. Probably me and my denseness. "Kazama threatened to bust the two of you wide open for the public and I have no doubt that bastard will twist what he can the way he wants to. You guys said you wanted to be our equals. Hajime is giving you that chance. Don't waste it."

"So everyone else gets a happy ending but I have to wait?" I had snorted in mock amusement.

"You don't know what you're talking about, woman. Cat will be waiting just as long as you for the same reason and despite how they have been acting, nothing happened between Shinpachi and that woman last night. I don't know what they are trying to pull but he wouldn't take someone he cares about that quickly, like she was some geiko." He had sounded casual the whole time he spoke but I was afraid to turn and face him. So I closed my eyes and saw that look on Hajime's face, in his eyes.

It still haunted me.

Snapping back to reality I gasped and reached for my lyrics. They had

felt off, forced. Now I knew what I would write about with this track and our music.

* * *

><p>"Welcome back to America's Band Showdown this is our second week of full on competition. Last week America voted It Will Be Glorious off the show and the remaining bands received secret tracks that they had to write music to. Let's see what we have going on tonight." Nathaly sounded happy as usual but I only registered that in the back of my mind. I was nervous. "Let's greet our judges. In the middle we have the happy force that keeps our two rivals at bay, DJ White Saille. On the right is the bully of the panel, the heavy handed critic, Kazama. And over on the left we have the soft spoken realist give it up for Hajime Saito."<p>

The crowd was going crazy and I took that moment to really look at Hajime. He looked tired, like he hadn't been sleeping.

"Well to get right into it let's call out the first band. No particular order here. Let's hear it for the first band of the nightâ€¦14Phantom!" Ferah and Lyna gave us high fives on the way out and as we listened to their song I felt my nerves kick into an even higher gear. It never ceased to amaze me how _good_ those guys were.

The bands whittled down one by one till we were last. I used to think playing last was the best. It was the last song people heard for the night and that meant it stuck with them. But the crowd was getting tired and bored. That was the real danger of playing last. You had to pump them back up or you would fail.

"And our final band of the night, give a warm welcome to Flowers and Water." Nathaly was still as chipper as ever, but let's face it. She was getting paid to be energetic.

"Hey everyone, we are Flowers and Water." I said into the microphone. "It has come to our attention that a lot of people agree with Kazama that that last song was cheesy. So this time we will try to convey our feelings another way. This is our song, Stay Close."

The track started first with some weird synthetic sounding strumming. Ten seconds in I started singing followed by more beats from the track. Later on Shukke would add her drums and then from there the other girls would join in.

_I wanna know you,
>There's so much at stake.
Can't face the melodies,
>They bend me until I break.

Hiding from the past,
>But it's eating me alive.
>Can't block it out
>When it's coming from inside.

Every turn leads me to a new dead end.
>Lost again, I'm screaming your name.

Unconciously I moved to the left side of the stage to stand in front of Hajime before bending at the waist with the effort I took in

putting all my emotions into these words while Cat sang back up with just as much feeling.

Come close, come close
>And call my name.
>How can you turn your back on me
>When you know my pain?

Stay close, stay close
>Light up the night.
>Save me from the part of me
>That's begging to die.

Standing straight I didn't move as I sang the song I wrote for him, the look in his eyes still haunting me as I let loose the torrent of emotion welling up inside me.

_Precious denial,
>A stone to break my back.
The chains I carry won't cut me any slack.
>Imprisoned by fear,
No room for my heart
>My only hope,
Only you can heal the scar._

Every turn leads me to a new dead end.
>Lost again, I'm screaming your name.

Come close, come close
>And call my name.
>How can you turn your back on me
>When you know my pain?

Stay close, stay close,
>Light up the night.
>Save me the part of me
>That's begging to die.

Reaching out a hand that had been fisted throughout the song I stretched it in Hajime's direction without realizing what I was doing as I sang the slower part.

Stay by side,
>If you leave me, I will die.
>Stay by side,
>If you leave me, I will die.

Stay by side,
>If you hold me, I will fly.
>If you hold me, I will fly.
>Will you hold me?

My hand snapped back to a fist which I held to my heart.

Come close, come close
>And call my name.
>How can you turn your back on me
>When you know my pain?

Stay close, stay close,
>Light up the night.
>Save me from the part of me

>That's begging to die.

Come close, come close
>And call my name.
>How can you turn your back on me
>When you know my pain?

Stay close, stay close,
>Light up the night.
>Save me from the part of me
>That's begging to die.

As we finished the song the audiences' response was instantaneous. Clapping. Cheers. Shouts of approval. It felt good, standing there receiving praise for our work. And then the judges opened their mouths.

"Could you be any more obvious?" Kazama scoffed. "I'm sorry I can't take it anymore. Just kiss and make up or punch him or something. Stop wasting my time. We get it, you two love each other. We get it. You are both in pain. Kudos. Do something about it before my boredom turns to anger and I kill someone."

Hajime shifted his hand from the judges table to his sword but I just smiled.

"I know more about you then you do about me Kazama." I taunted, feeling a bit insane for doing so. "I know your situation better then you know mine. And if you don't come clean we will have to lie. And I don't like to lie."

"Do you really think it's a good idea to provoke an Oni, girl?" Kazama sneered, causing the crowd to mutter.

"Oops, stage time is up." I said before bowing low to the judges and turning my back on the Oni. As I walked out I heard a dark chuckle and I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh as well or be frightened.

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Stay Close by Fireflight (Flowers and Water's song [I really recommend looking it up, great song])

31. Interview: Battle

**A/N: **

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 30<p>

~Interview; Battle~

"_That song was amazing. Such power!"_

"_I know the vocals were primo and that melody..."_

"_And did you see the way she finally stepped up and sang it to Hajime?"_

"_So romantic!"_

"_Why are they trying to hide it though?"_

There were several speculations running rampant on the forums on CBS dedicated to our band and though some were really outlandish others were rather close to home. I was hiding to avoid pissing anyone off and Hajime was giving me the chance I felt I needed. But reading all the thoughts and opinions of Flowers and Water's fans it made me feel more than a little stupid. I was starting to wonder why it had been so important to meâ€¦getting famous. I told myself it was to get back at Hajime. To get even with him. Then it became me not wanting to fall behind and just follow him around like a lost puppy.

To be honest, being in his life was more important to me than any of that. Those were momentary spikes of pride. But I still put my all into the band. So what now was my reason for being in Flowers and Water?

This is what Stacy was talking about when she told us to rename from Plan B.

And I suppose I found my answers in the first week's song. Paper Moon was about how I would lift my band mates up the way they always lifted me.

Hajime. Thinking his name conjured those eyes for me. The caged but feral eyes that told me he felt trapped.

The bands still in the running for America's Band Showdown had received instruction from the producer that we were expected to show for the interview Umarekawaru and the Oni Complex would be doing for experience in handling such matters.

I just don't know who told that producer that this would be a regular run of the mill interview, 'cause I had a bad feeling about this one.

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

Kazama was pacing when Sen-hime walked into the suite he and the other members of the Oni Complex had been given to live in during the Showdown's runtime.

"You had better not be thinking what I hope you're not thinking." She walked right up to him with a scrunched face and grabbed his arm as she yelled. Kazama paused in his methodical movement and glanced patronizingly down at the Oni woman's hand around the crook of his elbow.

"I don't think it's a good idea to be touching him, Sen-hime." Kaoru advised a bit timidly before the blonde shook her off him and resumed

his pacing.

"Kazama you'll put us all at risk with your stupid, foolish, _childish _rivalry. Your behavior is not fit for aâ€¦" But her words cut off in a gulp as Kazama turned and _stepped_ towards her a malicious glint in his eye.

"Not fit for an Oni, right?" Kazama sneered. "What is it fit for then? A human? Don't make me laugh." He looked like he was ready for many things, murder, maiming; laughter was not one of them. "What _you_ would have me do, or continue to do, is cowardly. Oni are not cowards. Not the Oni I know at any rate."

"The world is not like it was. They have ways of killing us easily. The slightest provocation could spell all kinds of disaster. I know you don't owe me or the Oni still alive anything butâ€¦" She pleaded.

"You're right, I owe you nothing." Kazama said matter-of-factly. "If you'll excuse me, there is somewhere we must be. Amagiri, Shiranui, Kaoru. You three are ready, correct?"

The other members of the Oni Complex stood and made to walk past Sen-hime. She looked up hopefully at each one in turn, but none seemed repentant for what their leader was planning to do. Amagiri alone cast a single glance of apology.

Sen-hime watched the group leave before falling to her knees. Hanging her head she began to think of what she could do to prevent the annihilation of her kind.

Kazama continued to feel jittery. It was like the day before a battle and he was full of bloodlust. It was not fear that filled him. Kazama had never really known the feeling of fear and it didn't assail him now. No he was excited.

"Kazama, are you sure we should-" Amagiri began, but Shiranui interrupted him with a big shit eating grin.

"Does he look unsure?" He asked rhetorically. "Just relax and enjoy the fun."

Twenty minutes of traffic later both bands were sitting backstage of another late night show and tensions were high. The host was revving the crowd up while Kazama glared balefully at Hijikata. The vice-commander in turn looked rather sour at the threatening stare.

"And nowâ€¦let's hope they give us a night's worth of entertainment, because they are all we booked. Give it up for the rivals of the century, Umarekawaru and the Oni Complex!"

Both bands walked on stage smoothly while giving each other antagonistic glares and false smiles. As one Umarekawaru stopped and bowed to the audience while Kazama just looked at them with fairly unconcealed disgust. Shiranui mocked them by almost bowing before kicking his boot at Harada's face as he raised it. Some of the crowd laughed, others booed.

Harada just smiled at his one-time accomplice and gave him the

finger.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen." The host smiled and waved everyone over to sit at the stools provided. Each member had a microphone pinned to their shirts. "You guys really don't like each other huh?"

"It's been like this for ages," Kondou said cryptically.

"How long have the two bands known each other?" The host asked, oblivious to the can of worms he just opened.

"That depends on how you measure the time." Kazama spoke softly, trusting his microphone to pick up his words.

"Finally!" Heisuke grouched.

"Amagiri, didn't you crush that one's face in?" Shiranui asked, thrusting his thumb in the young guitarist's direction.

"Ah, that gimmick everyone is talking about, right?" The host said oblivious to Heisuke's hand moving to the hilt of his sword.

"Yeah," Shinpachi snorted sarcastically, "gimmick."

"Didn't you know," Kaoru _stepped_ to Heisuke and grabbed his wrist as his hand reached the katana's hilt. People screamed. "It's not that kind of era anymore."

In response Heisuke lashed out with his foot, causing the youngest Oni to release him and move back a few paces. In that moment of leeway the ponytailed young man grabbed his sword and unsheathed it while jumping off the stool and backing up a step.

"And here I thought it wouldn't come to violence." Amagiri sighed as Souji also stood and walked over to Kaoru and Heisuke.

"Yo, Chibi-chan." He hailed his band mate. "The twerp is mine."

"What? No way, he started in on me; I get to take care of him." Heisuke retorted.

"He 'started in on' me before we even knew he was a dude." Souji said with a shrug.

"Ah, yes. The Ochimizu." Kaoru nodded. "Think you can take an Oni without it, Mr. Okita Souji, Captain of the first division of the Shinsengumi? I would give you some more, but unfortunately we didn't take any with us for the jump and haven't a clue how to make it."

"Oh, I can handle _you_ just fine." Souji sneered.

"I don't see why you're so upset," Kaoru baited. "You didn't have long to live anyway." Souji responded by unsheathing his katana and positioning it in front of him. "Foolish human."

"Kaoru?" Kazama called over his shoulder at the dueling pair.

"Hmm?" Kaoru responded without looking.

"Don't kill him. This is not our modern duel." The blonde drawled before turning to the host who looked shocked.

The crowd was staring in complete silence at the duel in progress. The smooth and quick movements of both men boggled their minds. It would take a life time to move like that. To be able to detect your opponents moves before he carried them out. A life time or a desperate need to be that good.

"Shouldn't we stop them? Someone could get hurt!" The host sounded panicked and Cat felt his fear, but for a different reason. Souji was fighting one of the Oni. The youngest to be sure, but he was still an Oni. Both Hijikata and Kazama glanced back at their fighting band mates and then at each other.

"In front of all these people?" Hijikata queried cautiously.

""This is live television, correct?" Kazama asked the host.

"Well yes." Came the timid, hesitant response of the man behind his desk.

"Then you can agree that there is no way this footage is being processed or rendered in any way?" Kazama continued.

"Without a doubtâ€¦"

"Good, because you need proof and Hakuouki needs incentive." And without a moments warning Kazama _stepped_ between Hijikata and Chizuru, who was there as Umarekawaru's manager. Still moving at a speed nearly incomprehensible to the human mind the Oni drew his opponent's sword of steel and slashed deeply into Chizuru's right bicep, spraying blood everywhere.

As people began to scream in terror and disgust Amagiri and the purple haired Shiranui ran at that lightening like speed to block the doors. Giving Amagiri a meaningful look, Shiranui left the guard duty to the bigger man and dashed to the back stage area.

Meanwhile onstage, Souji and Kaoru were locked blade to blade before Kaoru smirked and flicked his blade with seemingly little effort, sending Okita flying. The rest of Umarekawaru were furious at Kazama and had no trouble showing it. They didn't seem overly worried about their manager's life.

The camera man zoomed in on her arm as a young man in the crowd shouted, "Whoa look at that! It's healing!"

The panic in the back of the room calmed and the audience as a whole looked over to see the girl's arm closing at visible speeds while Chizuru looked away sheepish and shy.

"One of the many powers of an Oni." Amagiri announced from the back of the room.

Kazama tossed Hijikata's katana back to him and pulled out his own weapon, the Douji-giri Yasutsuna. "Not that you can win as you are now." He mocked, "But let us have some fun." The sneer on his face told the crowd exactly what kind of 'fun' he would be having in

mercilessly beating his opponent.

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru called fearfully, seeming to have little faith.

"Very well." Hijikata ignored his girlfriend in favor of facing off against his Oni rival.

Shiranui came back from the backstage area with a long shaft of wood with a piercing blade of metal attached to it. He whistled to get someone's attention but when none of the people on stage looked over he called out, "Yo, Harada."

When the red headed drummer looked over the Oni lobbed the spear at Sanosuke and gave a toothy grin. The crowd looked over to Harada as he caressed the old dirty wood of the weapon.

"This brings back memories." He said with a small grin.

"I brought it with me for the jump, lucky for you it was still stuck in your grave where I left it. I didn't think you would be here, but I liked the memory it held. I figured you wouldn't mind and to be honest I didn't care." Shiranui continued to grin as he pulled out his two pistols and aimed them at Harada's head and chest. Of course the crowd was screaming again. "Relax; I won't hit anyone but my opponent."

"You can try." Harada crowed.

As the first shot went off, which Harada dodged easily, Hijikata and Kazama began their fight.

Hijikata lunged at the blonde Oni only to have Kazama block the blade with the flat of his own, holding it still with his unfathomable strength.

"You're nothing without the power of the Rasetsu." Kazama mocked, "You have become weak."

"But I am still strong enough to fight you." Hijikata returned while jumping back and swinging at his opponent. Kazama waited until the last second and merely bent his body backwards a fraction, watching as the blade danced past his eyes.

"Too slow," He jeered.

All of a sudden in the crowd a heart wrenching cry went out dragging attention away from all the fights as Cat of Flowers and Water ran on stage a sword in her hands.

"_Souji!"_

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

No one was really watching that idiot fight anymore. But I was. I couldn't take my eyes off it; that beautiful but terrifying duel. I know Kazama told that little kid to not kill Souji but just watching it was hard to believe he would hold back. That idiot was holding his

own against the little Oni though. It scared me though because that seemed to be pissing the boy off.

Then it happened. Souji was swiping at the boy in a wide sweeping attack and as the kid countered he sent Souji's blade flying. As he reached for the second blade that should be at his waist, the one that I had at mine, Kaoru or whatever his name was muttered "Too bad."

I was thankful for a couple things right then. One that they had fought their way from the back of the stage to the front and two we were in the front row right in front of them. Let's not forget of course that I wore the sword today and that Kaoru's back was to the crowd. That let me see Souji's face though and boy did he look pissed.

Kaoru raised his weapon executioner style and without waiting for anything to happen my body began moving on its own. The voice was shouting Souji's name in a forlorn and heart breaking manner and his sword, my sword, still in its sheath came crashing down on the Oni boy's head, his own blade inches from Souji's throat.

In shock the Oni boy stopped his strike and lashed out at me with his weapon. I didn't have the skill or speed to counter it so I just watched, life flashing before my eyes. As the blade was about to cut my flesh Kaoru started to fall backwards away from me, Souji's foot having kicked him in the back of the knee.

"You will _not_ touch her, Kaoru." He snarled and if I thought he was pissed before he was furious now. "And I do not require your help, Catherine." Normally Souji using my full name would piss me the hell off, but right nowâ€¦in this situation, I let it slide. But that is the only thing I let slide.

"Didn't seem that way from where I stood," I said with more confidence than I felt.

"Technically you were sitting." He pointed out.

"I'm standing now," I snapped, several microphones picking up my words.

"Whatever, hand me my sword so I can finish this." He held out his hand for the weapon in mine.

"No, this one is mine, go get yours." I got defensive.

"Cat." His voice held a warning in it but I ignored it. "It is still my sword."

"Are you saying you want it back because I helped?" To be honest the idea of him asking for the sword back was upsetting. I had a glimpse of how Saito must feel.

"You can have it right back woman, just let me beat this twerp." He snarled. The whole crowd was watching our exchange and I had to admit it felt good seeming more important than the different sword fights going on.

"I have _had_ it." Kaoru exclaimed. He walked over to Souji's other

sword and brought it to him. "I won. So now you can fight her, because clearly you need to have a go at each other. Humans are so annoying." As I stared in wonder at the 'twerp' walking off stage Souji stood up and dusted off his pants.

"I really think that might help," he said straightening his back.

"Fine then," I grumbled as I began pulling the sword from its sheath only to find Souji's sword an inch from my cheek.

"We bow first, remember?" He teasingly reminded me. "And we should wait till everyone is done, you are so easily distracted." I growled at him only for him to tsk me and wave a finger. "Now, now, dogs growl, cats hiss. I have told you that before."

"And it still pisses me off." I snapped at him again.

"Just have some patience." He said softly.

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

As far as Hijikata could tell Souji was safe now, the dangerous look in Kaoru's eyes no longer glaring at him. The vice-commander knew, after having been in so many battles and scrapes in his life, that the boy would have killed Souji even with Kazama telling him not to.

And he knew Souji knew it too. All of them did. But they knew Souji's pride. He had to have had a plan to survive and if any of them interfered he would probably die because of it instead of being saved. They had, none of them, planned for Cat's intervention. Clearly it was enough though because Kaoru had looked at them with a bit of disgust and a vague sense of disappointment before handing the first division's captain his sword from where it had been flung and walked away.

The knowledge that one of his friends was safe allowed him to focus just that bit more on the fight before him. He was not worried for Harada; he knew they were just having fun despite the insults, shots and thrusts being thrown back and forth.

"Are you ready to get serious, Hakuouki?" Kazama asked him in his arrogant, drawling manner.

"I'm never not serious." Hijikata told him with a frown. _It's a shame._ He thought to himself. _In different circumstances maybe I could have been friends with someone a little like him. _

"Your face has gone soft, Hakuouki. What could you possibly be thinking during a battle like this to make your face soft like that?" Kazama snarked.

"It's not important." Hijikata answered smoothly before smoothing his features and getting back into a serious frame of mind and attacking the Oni once more.

As that was going on Harada and Shiranui were at a standstill,

Shiranui's guns were resting against Harada's forehead and the spearman's weapon was placed just under the Oni's Adam's apple.

"Che," the Oni sounded annoyed, "still the same after all this time, huh?"

"It's not been so long for us you know." Harada reminded him. "Did you really bury me?"

"Course. Right next to Takasugi." Shiranui said with what seemed to be an unaffected manner.

"You mentioned him that nightâ€¦friend of yours I take it?" Harada prodded.

"Yeah. Only human friend I ever made." The Oni looked over at Sano with a grin. "Well I can't say that anymore I guess." Sano held his right hand out for the purple head to take and when he did they shook on a friendship that was obvious to everyone else.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

I watched as each fight concluded until only Hijikata and Kazama were fighting anymore. Cat was on stage and I figured _that_ would be interesting. Kazama finally speared the floor with the Douji-giri Yasutsuna and side stepped Hijikata's last swing with a smirk.

"We all know I am stronger than you, and I am better in swordsmanship." He sneered causing Hijikata to frown deeper. "That is why we are dueling with music. It is something you have the potential to win at." Hijikata sheathed his sword and looked Kazama in the eye.

"You might be stronger but you are not better." Hijikata told him firmly.

"Oni to Oni, you could use some work. You are not what you once were, back in the Bakumatsu." Kazama told him.

My eyes wandered to Saito as they talked. He was glancing over at Souji, who caught his eye and nodded. Saito then found me with his eyes and walked right up to me, much like that last night during the Ten Ugly Battles. However, this time he did not ask me anything or explain his actions, he just grabbed my arm and pulled me up to take the left side of the stage.

A previously quiet crowd was cheering.

"A lot of truths are coming out now Ry-chan." Saito told me as he continued to hold me wrist on stage. "Perhaps our truth should as well."

"Why now?" I asked. It seemed a little overkill.

"I am tired of losing sleep over it. I am tired of reaching for my sword only to remember I have two again." He answered seriously.

"What do you suggest then?" I was intrigued. He was up to something.

"If I win a duel against you," Saito explained, "You take back the sword you returned and come back to me and be mine again. You can continue with the battles, you can try for fame. But you do it with me at your side."

"And if I win?" I asked him.

"In the highly unlikely event that you win," Souji said for him when he floundered a bit. "You can do as you please. Don't just let him win though. This outta be good."

32. Two Duels: Public Reaction

**A/N: **

Sorry for missing the last post time. My pet died and I just wasn't in the mood to do anything let alone write. As for the guest that keeps pointing out the chapter numbering...I skipped a number a while ago, but its this chapter is correctly numbered. Remember chapter 1 was a prolouge so technically the real Chapter 1 was posted as Chapter 2 by fanfiction. Thank you though. Sorry this is kinda short. Hope you enjoy though.

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 31<p>

~Two Duels; Public Reaction~

No matter how you sliced it, this was going to happen. It had to happen. And as we stood there, his hand still on my wrist I could hear the individual yells of the audience start to flare up.

"Kick his ass Ryane!" Ferah shouted.

"Own him Hikiri!" That was Lanz.

"Get it over with!"

"Go Hajime!"

As the crowd's volume grew Hajime released my wrist and pulled the shorter of his two swords from his belt. Handing this to me, he took three steps back standing with his hands at his sides and his feet evenly spaced. After attaching the sword to my own belt I assumed a similar stance.

"You're sure about this, Ry-chan?" He asked me. As if I would change my mind. When I nodded he gave a small, sad smile and said, "I won't hold back then." But I knew that wasn't entirely true. He would give me a fighting chance to attain what I wanted.

But after a small window of time, no, he wouldn't hold back after that.

Without any warning of any sort Hajime ran those three steps he had taken backwards, drawing his sword as he came. There was screaming coming from the stands, though it was a mixture of fan girls' 'kyaas' and others' genuine terror. If I was in their position I would be scared for the life of the girl he was about to cross blades with. But since I was the one fighting him I knew better than to fear him. Hajime might have hurt me emotionally and maybe mentally but he would never physically harm me. As Okita said those many months ago when Cat and I first started learning swordsmanship, I was in good hands.

I almost didn't have time to react but instinct took over and I drew my weapon to clash blades with his. Hajime pushed against his sword, bringing him closer to me. I guess a part of me was expecting his stoic face to show respect or even a glimpse of his frustration or longing. But his cold exterior didn't change as he parried through the attack sending me back several steps.

Without pause he lunged with his left hand causing me to spin away, mere luck making my blade stop his from the wide, sweeping attack he followed through with.

"Oi oi, show some restraint!" Ferah yelled from her spot in the second row.

"He is!" Okita shouted back at her, shutting her up.

"He said he wouldn't hold back!" Lanz called as if appalled that Hajime wasn't going all out.

"Do you want her to die?" Okita shot at him.

"Well don't let him complain if he loses," Lanzikai said loud enough for the audience to hear.

"You mean when!" Ferah added, full of confidence.

Our blades clashed again as Ferah said this and I couldn't help but laugh. _They don't know anything. They don't understand anything. This is all just a farce. Both Hajime and I should fully understand how this will end. It's why he didn't have a prize planned for me, should I win. Nothing is a secret really. He knows why and how he will win._

Again and again our swords met. He was getting closer and closer to winning because I was getting more and more tired. _It's about that time._ I thought to myself as I positioned my sword for a lunge. He matched my stance. The crowd was going wild.

_It's about that time. _

* * *

><p>Umarekawaru:<p>

There was something off about Ryane's stance to the rest of the Shinsengumi. Her blade was too low and there was not enough tension

in her legs. Saito still moved his body into a similar position and angled his katana to where it would pierce the woman he loved through the middle of her throat if he should happen to connect.

Ryane was the first to launch her body, Saito following closely behind. As they reached each other though the young woman dropped her sword and threw herself at Hajime. He in turn tilted his blade so that the deadly weapon pierced the space above her right shoulder. The lovers' lips met in a very similar fashion to their first kiss as a crowd of onlookers cheered their approval.

"Yeah, yeah, now get out of the way!" Cat yelled from where she stood next to Okita. "Took you so God damn long!"

"Our turn I suppose." Souji said with a smirk. "Would you care to make the same wager they did?"

"Yeah right, like I need a reason to lose. We all know I am going to, and we both know now that that mess is over with I won't feel guilty about anything; being with you." Cat said with a snort. "Then again, you haven't been acting too bright, so you might be too dumb to have figured that out."

"Then why are we fighting?" Souji asked with a grin.

"I just want to beat the crap out of you for all you guys have done. Figure that's reason enough." Cat smiled.

"Hey, Souji, she's perfect for you!" Shinpachi said with a chuckle. Okita eloquently responded with a shrug.

"I suppose she is, but I didn't need you to tell me," he smirked.

Cat drew her weapon and commanded, "Quit trying to be a smooth talker and draw."

"You asked for it little girl." Okita sneered.

"Bring it wanna be samurai." Cat said with her own smirk. Okita just smiled patronizingly and began his attack.

Several minutes passed before Souji had Cat pinned under him, his sword firmly planted in the floor beside her head and his hands pressed down on either side of her shoulders.

"I win." His smirk was back full force.

"You know, you're lucky I like you or I would kick you in the-" Cat started to mouth off but, not really in the mood for it, Souji silenced her with a kiss. When he was sure she wouldn't talk right away the first division captain pulled away.

"We both know you don't 'like' me," He told her cockily. Cat responded by mumbling under her breath and trying to push him away.

"Would you get off me before I _maim_ you?" Cat snarled while trying to kick him.

"I am going to have to get you declawed. Bad kitty." Souji grinned.

"That's it I am neutering you!" To which Okita hastily stood up and jumped back a step.

The studio audience was already laughing but doubled over as Ryane lifted her attention from Saito for a moment to yell across the stage, "Well at least she's litter trained and doesn't claw the furniture."

Cat looked over at her with a frown before shouting, "I don't think he needs your help. Go back to whatever it is you were doing."

The host of the show seemed to have mastered the fear he was feeling throughout the outbreak of violence and, clambering from under his desk, he cleared his throat, pretending to shuffle through some prompt cards on his desk. "Well, um, yeah, right, well, uhâ€¦" He tried to think of how to begin but couldn't quite bring himself to form a coherent sentence.

"Ryane is the one who found us in the mall in Rochester the day we came forward in time and back from death. She, Shukke and Cat took care of us but things got complicated. My very reason for being in Umarekawaru was to give to her songs to make her smile. Songs that would let her know how much I cared." Saito explained.

"We all got our own reasons as time went by," Hijikata continued for him. "Whether it be making a difference or because it was fun."

Souji smirked as he said, "Hajime-kun wrote the lyrics to every love song we performed and he did it while thinking of Ryane. I wrote the music thinking of Cat. That's why most of our love songs are so well received I think. 'Course, things didn't go as planned really."

It took twenty minutes to catch the audience up to speed, but J-born figured it well worth it, even while Flowers and Water began to dread any potential shit storm.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"Ugh," I groaned while looking at the forums on the J-born fansite. For some of them being die-hard fans, J-born Agains could be real idiots.

"Reading their forums again, Ryane?" Shukke asked without looking up from the magazine she was reading.

"Some idiot wants the government to experiment on Chizuru and come up with a serum that induces super-fast healing." I griped as I turned away from the computer to look at her.

"Would that be more or less frustrating than those religious zealots who got on there to call the band a group of Satan worshipping acts against god?" Cat asked with seeming nonchalance. She was full of shit with that 'I don't care' attitude. When she heard that some puritan wanted to burn Souji at the stake for his sin of resurrection

it took everything we had to calm her down enough not to run around the country looking for whoever said it.

"I don't think anyone in this room was not pissed off about the religious ones." Stacy said with no small amount of anger.

"Except Shukke," I pointed out. We all turned to look at our drummer, who still had her nose in the People Magazine she was reading. A picture of Umarekawaru was on the cover along with the words 'Their Grave Secret Revealed.'

She still didn't so much as turn a page and I am sure she didn't bat an eyelash. "I said it before, I will say it again. They can say and think what they like. I know, we all know, what kind of people they really are and we all feel strongly towards them. As long as no one actually acts against any of them, I could give a rat's ass what the audience feels."

I had to hand it to her, she made sense. But I still couldn't block the lingering anger at the death threats to my friends and I certainly couldn't ignore the things being said about Hajime. The light in the dark was that the true 'J-born Agains' were fighting back. And people who had looked upon the band with scorn for being a gimmick were now in full support.

"Besides," Shukke continued, "I would be more worried about what people are saying on the CBS forums about you and Cat being 'corpse lovers'. If things continue the way they are we could be in trouble. So I suppose the real question is, how are _we _going to deal with Flowers and Water fans."

"Waitâ€¦What?" Cat snapped her head up in shock.

"You heard me," She said gravely.

Stacy scratched her head before suggesting, "We could write a song about it."

"No," Shukke shot the idea down, "That is our general response to issues, or at least it has been so far. I think we should branch away from that."

"What about an interview?" Cat asked.

"We aren't famous enough to get an interview and it would be arrogant to suggest it," I told her bluntly. I could see where Shukke was going with this and I knew she wouldn't accept alternatives. _Ah well, she is the plot master. If anyone can get us out of this it's her._ I thought, defeated.

"We are going to ignore it." Shukke announced. _There it is, a wild a crazy scheme._

"Are you stupid? You just said, 'if things continue the way they are we could be in trouble.'" Cat barked in confusion.

"That's where Umarekawaru comes in. What do you think me and Shinpachi were talking about the night he came over?" Shukke sounded as smug as Okita and I was sure she was smirking behind that magazine.

"Waitâ€¦. Hold the phone. Didn't you guysâ€¦" Cat's eyes bugged as she stared at Shukke. "You just pretended that you both hadâ€¦and then â€¦ but why?"

"To tip the scales. To be honest it didn't work on Okita, he saw through Shinpachi's act and confronted him. I don't think Saito was fooled either. But you both were." She gloated at that. "So it wasn't a lost cause. The point was to make you long for your counterparts enough to do something foolish. Like lose a duel even though it might cost us everything." At this she finally lowered the issue of People and looked over at me with sparkling eyes. "We will fix this though."

Her promise filled me with hope. If anyone could figure out this situation it was Shukke. She probably already had.

33. Escalation: Up In Flames

**A/N: **

Bah a couple days late sorry again. Hope you enjoy!

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 32<p>

~Escalation; Up In Flames~

Now that it was out in the open, this love of Hajime's and mine, we could go places together. Be seen together. The problem was schedules. Shukke constantly had me working on new music and, well, Hajime was a rock star. A rock star with a lot of explaining to do. His fans were hounding him for answers and many people were throwing vile accusations at him and the rest of the band.

Acts against god.

Freaks of nature.

Evil.

Murderous fiends.

I wanted to make them all see the miracle in the Shinsengumi's rebirth. I wanted them to see how hard it was for the guys to live in this day and age. How they had feared to say anything for exactly this reason, though they longed so very much to make bonds with people. I wanted them to know the members of the band, Kondou-san and Chizuru. Maybe if they knew more about the types of people they were instead of only knowing them as rock stars and people who transcended death and time, they would fall as much in love with them, be as close as friends with them, as me, Shukke, Cat and Stacy.

The Battle Show lost its level of importance in my life in the face of all the controversy but even so I was surprised, having read our

forums and knowing that there were several groups of once fans who thought us little better than necrophiliacs, when the first vote off of February found us still on the show. Instead a band called Desired End got the boot.

Next week didn't have a challenge but Kazama was very clear with what he wanted from Flowers and Water. We were not, under any circumstances allowed to write or perform a love song. Some people in the stands had booed him but he just waved his hand at them as if to acknowledge their opinion, when really, I don't think he really cared. So far, aside from the churches sending parishes to picket outside the show's auditorium there hadn't been any signs of discontent during the filming.

I didn't know how long that would last.

All wrapped as I was in thoughts about what was going on, I didn't actually hear the person climbing into my unlocked window connected to the fire escape but as the cold February air blew across my face I opened my eyes from where I sat meditating on my bed to look into the beautiful blue eyes of the man who I loved. From where he stood inches away from me.

Startled I yelped and fell backwards from my cross legged position. I could tell by the way he started to lean in that he was going to get in my face again, but as if she had an egg timer for the best time to get in the way, Shukke popped up like 'ding'.

"Oh, hello Saito-san." She sounded way to happy. "Sorry to interrupt."

"You don't sound it!" I barked at her.

"That's because she isn't." Hajime said with a sigh. "Shukke, I am borrowing your vocalist for the evening."

"Make sure she's home at a decent hour." Was her only response.

"What are you, my mother?" I asked, annoyed.

But Hajime just inclined his head in a half nod before saying, "Of course ma'am." He then pulled me to my feet and towards the fire escape. "The media is swarming your door almost as much as they are ours." And without letting me grab a jacket or hat he dragged me outside and down the narrow metal stairs of the escape.

"This thing does _not_ feel safe!" I complained as the stairs wobbled under me.

"Should I carry you?" He asked it so deadpan I wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. Then again, two steps after he asked my feet hit pavement.

As we sidled into the crowds from the ally the fire escape lead to that cold February wind blasted down the New York street causing me to shiver violently. Shoulders clothed only with a light tee-shirt were suddenly warm and Hajime draped his own coat over me.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I didn't let you grab a jacket."

"Pfft," I responded. "You probably just wanted me to use yours."

"It looks good on you." He said conversationally.

"Huh," I snorted. "So where are we going?"

"Just around," He told me. "We haven't seen much of each other." And so, picking a random direction, Hajime and I began walking.

We didn't get very far before _it_ started happening. At first it was just random people pushing past us in the crowd of people. I figured since it was New York and the sidewalks were pretty packed it was just someone moving too fast and being rude. But things escalated. After a few shoves the people pushing us around began to pull at my hair or step on my feet. I was pretty sure that nobody was doing these things to Hajime, but then again they could clearly see that he had a sword.

Finally it happened.

"Hey corpse lover!" Some random man in the crowd behind us yelled. Neither Hajime nor I turned around and so the man persisted as the mass of bodies around us stopped moving to enjoy the show. We had no way out. "Hey, you! Yeah you, the one walking next to the dead guy! I know you can hear me!"

I was about to turn around, really I was, but then there was a sharp pain in the back of my head and the sound of a rock bouncing onto the pavement at my feet. The bitch threw a rock at the back of my head! I was seeing red in my anger. Putting my hand to the impact point I brought it back to my eyes and saw blood.

"You have made a grave mistake," Hajime said from beside me. I heard him unsheathe his katana. "You make her bleed, I make you bleed." He intoned.

"Who's afraid of the big, bad corpse, huh?" The man shouted, but others were backing away.

I was still seeing red. I was still angry. I was bleeding and in pain and to be honest I could kill that man myself with the way I was feeling. But still my feet began to move. As I heard some random chick in the area scream I ran faster. I watched as Hajime's sword descended and before it was too late I threw myself in front of the man he intended to slice. The sword stopped. Hajime's usually stoic face showed his confusion so I smiled in reassurance.

"Allow me Hajime," I told him.

I turned to the man who threw a freaking rock at my head and the smile slowly dropped. "See how she controls the cor-" he started up again, but I just cocked my hand back and punched him as hard as I could in the mouth.

"He is not a corpse." I told him as he flailed on the ground. "He is as alive as you are, and certainly deserves to be more than you do." I could feel myself shaking in rage.

"God will judge you!" Another random individual yelled.

"Then let him do it himself. He certainly doesn't need your help, being omnipotent and all." I heard the familiar snide voice of a very pissed off Cat. She and Souji broke through the crowd and walked over to us. "Whooo, you done it now girl." She told me, taking in the blood at the back of my head and the man still on the ground in front of me.

"It's another one of those corpse lovers." Someone jeered.

"Pfft," Cat responded. "Can't let 'em get to you, Ryane." She told me.

"Hey," Souji called out with his usual smirk. "Why don't you fine people move along before I cut your Achilles tendons. That would at least give you a reason to hang around." He made to draw his sword and like that the crowd dispersed. "Rough night, huh Hajime?" He asked when there were less people.

"Shukke is gonna kill you guys, you know that right?" Cat looked between me and Hajime but at least she had the decency to look concerned. "This is gonna be bad publicity."

"What are you two doing here?" Hajime asked Souji quietly.

"We were headed back to the hotel, just happened across Ryane punching that guy and decided we should help. You know, Hajime-kun, for having such a solid head on your shoulders it sure can be filled with rocks." Souji said with a grin.

"You've changed too," Hajime told him. "Back then you would have just killed them all."

"Hey, Souji 2.0, I am gonna take Ryane back to the hotel." Cat called over to them from where we stood. "You take your boy and calm him down, cause, I mean, if looks could kill he'd be a nuke."

"Fine, I will see you later." Souji called to our retreating backs.

"You know we have a battle tomorrow," Cat was telling me. "You need to get some sleep or you'll have bags under your eyes. We'll have to wash that cut in the back of your head off first though."

"Thanks, Cat."

* * *

><p>Cat's Point of View:<p>

"I don't know, Shukke. It was a pretty close thing." I told our friend after explaining the situation to her. "If Ryane hadn't moved when she did to get in the way, I have no doubt that man would be dead. Things are getting out of control."

"We really do have to address it now," Stacy affirmed.

"Look, we don't have to explain the song, but let's do _that_ one before we don't have a chance to try anymore. We can't do a love song this week anyway," I pushed.

"Fine, we would vote and I would lose. Where is she right now? Sleeping? Good, let her cool off." Shukke looked at Ryane's door with a sigh. "She always did care too much about what other people thought. I thought she grew out of it, but I guess not."

"She told me she didn't plan to deck the guy. She didn't want him to get hurt. But thenâ€¦when he continued about Hajime being a corpse, she just reacted. She didn't think. She was just so mad, she snapped." I told the other two.

"She needs to calm down and relax." Shukke scoffed.

I had had it with that attitude though. "You need to have more of a heart. I bet even if those idiots were bashing Shinpachi you wouldn't react. You would scheme and plot and manipulate. But you wouldn't attack them on the spot. Not physically, not verbally, nothing. If it were you and him against a mob of people you wouldn't do anything."

"You are wrong." Shukke told me bluntly. "But I don't put myself in the position where that could happen. I haven't said anything about me and Shinpachi to the media, and I have asked him not to as well, because I know I can't handle something like that. I know if push came to shove I would act out. I would scream, I would cry, I would punch and kick. I am not ready for the shit storm you two go through. But that's why I stay away from it."

"She didn't have much of a choice in this," Stacy put in. "Everyone basically knew, and J-born was getting to a point where Kazama would have blown everything up about who they all really were. They had to admit their past to the public."

"I know that Stacy," Shukke snapped. "But she still needs to handle it better, hard as that may be. Otherwise she will get hurt."

That was the first time Shukke had ever acknowledged that she cared so much about our well-being in the plan. Or at least that was the first time I could remember her saying one of us getting hurt by something was the reason behind her argument. I don't know if it was her intention, but it shut us up.

"Whatever," I said with a sigh. "I am gonna go pass out. Beauty rest and all that." We had a long day ahead of us tomorrow. I didn't want to be less than my best.

* * *

><p>The Oni Complex:<p>

Kazama was looking at a tabloid in his dressing room at the battle's auditorium before the show began.

"Humans are forever idiots." He muttered to himself before putting the rag down, a picture of Ryane from Flowers and Water punching some random heckler in the face prominent on the cover.

"We are on in five, please get to the judges table, Kazama, sir." The woman sounded so frightened by him. It was amusing on one hand and annoying on the other.

The Oni had been getting their own shit storm since that interview. All manner of religious people had picketed around where they lived and the studios they worked in. Everywhere he went, Kazama heard about how some God, who he wasn't overly familiar with to be honest, was going to judge him and send him to hell.

No one had dared get close enough to him or his band mates to threaten bodily harm and he didn't expect them to. Humans always had a way of making more noise than their lungs could hold. In the end they would bark until they were hoarse and then slowly sidle away. That was in their nature, if only when going against someone stronger than they themselves were. Kazama pondered this while he slid into his seat next to the useless DJ White Saille, who was powdering her nose with intense care. The Third sat down shortly there-after.

"Your face is all over the tabloids Third," he sneered, but the human just ignored him, instead taking the time to readjust his sword. "Humans," he muttered.

"Hey, Hajime?" the DJ asked in a curious tone. "Are all the demons you've met this condescending, or does this one have a stick up his ass?"

"No," Third responded quietly, "Not all of them, but even though we are in a public place I wouldn't make an endeavor of pissing him off."

"You would protect me if he took a swing at me though, right?" She batted her eyelashes at him and Kazama rolled his eyes as he remembered her perfectly powdering herself. But Hajime became silent by way of answer.

"'If it's something you called upon yourself, I don't see myself getting involved for you.' Is what he is sayin' by the silence, woman." Shiranui mocked, popping up in the seat behind the judges. "I don't think he fancies you."

"Some things are best left unsaid, Oni." Hajime told him softly.

"Where's the fun in that?"

"Did you need something, Shiranui?" Kazama drawled.

"Not really, there is a bit of a fuss at the front gate so I snuck in. Something about scanning people for weapons . There were some other people finding ways in here, just so you know. I wouldn't trust in there 'security.'"

"Is something going to happen?" Hajime asked while trying to hide his concern.

"Who knows with you humans? They might just have been bored of staying in line." Shiranui assessed with a grin.

White Saille, who had been sulking on her own for a bit glanced towards the stage and then back at the slowly filling studio audience. "It's show time!" She said with a smile and the cameras

began to roll.

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

"Aw man," Cat was complainingâ€¦again. "We play last today too."

"Fine by me," Shukke said in a complacent tone.

"Not like we can change it." Stacy agreed.

I just looked around the room at all the bands. Most were glaring at us still, like they couldn't believe we were even here. To be frank, I didn't know why we had gotten this far either. We were one of seven bands. It was amazing we had gotten through last week with all the publicity going on but this week would be even tougher due to my rash behavior. Punching that guy. I was such an idiot.

As per usual, the two bands that Flowers and Water was friends with, LastLivingVampire and 14Phantom, made their way through the tense atmosphere towards us.

Ferah stood right in front of me and with a big grin said in a rather loud voice, "Quite the right hook you got there, Ryane!"

"Yeah, yeah," Lyna crowed while dealing out a few mock blows to Lanz's left bicep.

"In my opinion, anyone who starts shit with that Hajime guy while he's wearing a sword should get what he decides to give them." Crow said just as loud.

"You saved his life. People should remember that instead of that admittedly awesome punch he received." Vakko stated.

"So," Sorin pushed past his two over eager band mates. "Are you following Kazama's order or are you doing another love song?"

"You'll see," Shukke said imperiously.

And so the bands dwindled down. Ferah and her band played a very dance flavored song that DJ White Saille praised highly whole Kazama called it trash. Hajime just laughed as the other two judges glared at each other before saying, "It certainly was different."

LastLivingVampire played a love song stating, "We figure since the girls aren't allowed to, we will serenade yall." Most of the girls in the crowd were getting into it, but the judges were not that impressed.

Finally it was us. I admit I was scared. I didn't know what kind of atmosphere I would be going on to. What would the audience sound like? Stepping on that stage I was surrounded by noise. Some people were cheering, some were booing. There were several signs with our names on them. Some were things like Go Flowers And Water some were spitting the same propaganda we should be used to.

I stepped up to the mic and said in a voice I had to force to be firm, "Moshi moshi we are Flowers and Water. This is our new song, not a love song, Up In Flames."

Cat began with a long note off her guitar and then Shukke and Stacy came in before I started singing quickly,

I don't wanna say what I got on my mind,
>Cause nothing tonight wants to
>Come out on time,
>The truth is I'd rather sit out and unwind,
>Let somebody else tell their story this time

I wonder what happened to give me the right,
>To

step on a platform and pick Up a mic,
>And tell you the way to be living your life,
>Cause all my credentials were lies

You've had your say, now take your seat, I know my place, you don't know me

I'll probably end up in flames before the end of the night, Watch me burn
>In the fire, watch me bid you goodbye, Your words fall right off the page,
>Like they fall on deaf ears, You know that it's over, nothing left for you
>Here

(Nothing left for you here)

I waited too long, letting people like you tell me what they want and what I
>Shouldn't do, So mark me with words, but you can't tie my hands, There's
>Nothing I'll say to make you understand

I know who I am, I know where I'll end up: in flames & that's fine, cause
>I'm finally fed up, Stick with what I started, don't care how it hurts, The
>Loudest get shot at the worst

You've had your say, now take your seat, I know my place, you don't know me

(Nothing left for you here)

You know I'll never fold like you're the authority, I won't throw my hands
>Up like you're the authority, You know I'll never fold like you're the
>Authority, I won't throw my hands up like you're the authority

(Nothing left for you here)

As we finished the song though, I heard a loud banging sound and a scream.

* * *

><p>Songs used:

Up In Flames by Icon For Hire.

34. Bonds: Where The Heart Is Again

**A/N: **

**I do not own anything to do with Hakuouki. Just the OCs...well sort of. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 33 Epilogue

~Bonds; Where The Heart Is Again~

In my mind I knew it was a gun shot. But that didn't register as much as a man screaming from the stands.

"Corpse lovers should be corpses!" He shouted over and over. Some of the crowd was joining in, but others still were wrestling with the man to get the gun out of his hands. Finally Amagiri waded into the mix and knocked the gun man out.

Still nothing made much sense to me until four pairs of feet ran to me as I fell first to my knees and then to my side, a brilliantly blooming fire roaring in my chest.

"Ryane!" My name was shouted by Stacy, Cat and Shukke at the same time, their voices blending together in a beautiful and chaotic harmony. For some reason they were scared.

"Ry-chan!" Hajime sounded like he was dead. Like the life in him had been torn out and he was empty.

I tried to call out to him in reassurance but all that came out was a pained gurgle. He kneeled down and touched his lips to mine, but when he pulled away his were coated in blood. The previously chanting crowd had gone quiet; watching like this was some premium midday melodrama.

I started coughing; a rough, hacking, wet cough. My green tee-shirt had long since been covered in blood but it still didn't register.

"Somebody do something!" Cat was shouting. "Someone call 911. Someoneâ€¦" She broke off in a sob.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," Shukke cried. I smiled.

Not part of your plan huh? I wanted to say.

"No one was supposed to die!" She continued.

Die? I thought, confused. _Oh, that's what this is._

"Can't one of you Oniâ€¦" Stacy began but Shiranui cut her off.

"She's too far gone. And it's too much of a bother to bring her back."

"Too much of aâ€¦" Cat repeated, stunned. She made to pull her sword.

"Cat, no!" Souji called as he and the rest of Umarekawaru finally got through the press of bodies seeping closer to watch meâ€¦die.

Hajime reached for my hand as Souji stopped my best friend from doing something deadly and I felt another smile as I coughed again. He had the most beautiful expression on his face and for a moment I thought this was all a dream. That he would save me just with the smile he was forcing for me.

"I love you too, Ryane," he told me. "I never said it back. Iâ€¦"

But everything was starting to fade as I watched his lips move. We were always interrupted.

* * *

><p>Third Person:<p>

"Where the fuck is Chizuru?" Cat screamed. "Which of you assholes shot her? I swear on the god you tote around so much your life is mine." But Souji just held her as they watched the life finally die out of her best friend.

"Chizuru is coming," Hijikata promised. "She will be here soon. She is focusing her energy for the ability that will bring Ryane back."

Hajime just stared at the woman he loved; at her corpse. Loneliness spread through him. An ache that he had never felt before. Tears began to form. How many times had he cried for this woman, been unmanned by his love for her? Folding his body over her now cold one, Hajime keened at his loss, the deep ache spreading to consume him.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "She'll be back!" Chizuru said in her kind, calm and caring way.

And so kissing her one last time the third captain of the Shinsengumi, a man who had once been full of purpose and hope, backed away from his Ry-chan without any emotion shining in his now dull eyes.

As Chizuru placed herself at Ryane's head she began to focus on the small ray of hope that always dwelled within her. The hope in the things that do not, will not, cannot change. The things Hajime helped her believe in so very long ago. Then she coupled that with her sorrow. The feeling of loss. The desire to see that important person

again. That important personâ€¦this time it was Ryane. All she had to do was look at the crumbling, sobbing, broken faces around her and that feeling was clear.

Chizuru closed her eyes and a bright white light flared from Ryane. The air seemed to crackle and the friends who gathered to watch and pray felt their ears pop.

Ferah took a step closer from where she stood with her band and LastLivingVampire only to find the space Ryane had been was now empty. Standing there she was close enough to hear Hijikata of Umarekawaru address Kazama.

"Looks like you win the duel." He said softly. "It would be cruel to expect Hajime to sing without Ryane in this world. We won't be making music till she gets back."

"Hmph," Kazama snorted, "We'll just start when she comes back then. You'll have a lot of catching up to do."

"How long?" Hajime asked having somehow found enough composer to speak.

"I tried to make it as short as I could, but it will be about five to ten years. I can't pinpoint any closer. Forgive me Saito-san." Chizuru said softly.

"She'll be back," Hajime said in reply as if he were exhausted. "That is enough for me."

* * *

><p>Ryane's Point of View:<p>

I woke up in an unfamiliar hotel room. All the clocks had been stopped at 8:53pm and the calendar hadn't been turned since February, 2014 but the air conditioning was on.

"It's been nine and a half years." A voice said from somewhere nearby. "When did you say you brought her forward?"

"Nine years, five months, seventeen days, fourteen hours and fifty-seven minutes." There was a pause. "Fifty-eight." The voice that spoke sounded tired and sad. As if the world had stopped being anything good. That precious voice. It had changed so much. But the words made no sense to me. What was he counting?

"Listen you!" The first voice shouted angrily, "You're the one who wants to come check every day, if we didn't come with you you would just stay here all day and night. It's not healthy. You are not a corpse you know?"

"Relax Cat," A slightly cocky male voice cooed. "Hajime, you go on ahead. See if she is back yet. We will be here waiting."

Familiar footfall carried someone dear beyond words to me. The door opened and his blue eyes shot wide at the sight of me. Purple hair streamed behind him as he practically ran to the bed I was on and he gingerly held me close. I could feel his tears as he shook.

"Thank you." He kept whispering over and over. "Thank you."

"I'm home." I told him happily.

"Welcome home." There was so much emotion in his voice that, even though I wasn't entirely sure how long nine years had seemed while he had waited or what had happened after my death, I cried too. Happy to be back in the warmth of his very alive arms.

* * *

><p>Epilogue:<p>

Time went by for the Shinsengumi and Ryane like it didn't exist. It turned out that after being given the gift of Umarekawaru the revived person did not age and would not die unless given a mortal wound. They did not get sick, they did not grow old even on a cellular level.

Because of this though, they could not sire or bear children. In time Stacy, Shukke and Cat died and were reborn by Chizuru's Oni heritage. They took on the appearance they had when they first met the Shinsengumi.

People outside of their circle of friends slowly got used to the idea but every once in a while the government would send a military unit to try to capture Chizuru and use her blood for experiments. They have yet to succeed.

Once Ryane was reborn fully, Hajime began to write music again. Something he had stopped doing after her untimely death. He couldn't bring himself to sing when his reason for doing so was no longer there.

Cat and Souji got married three years after the Battles. They were the ones to find out that the Shinsengumi could not father children, having died before. They had thought to wait for Ryane to come back, but Cat finally agreed that she would be back when she got back and that holding off on their lives for her would just piss her friend off. She decided such an act was stupid.

Stacy and Sannan had a butterfly themed wedding, even though Stacy had a great want for children of her own she found that her love for her partner in geekery was more important to her and if being with him meant no offspring she could live with that.

Shukke planned both of their weddings, and her own to Shinpachi. They didn't leave Shukke's bedroom in the house they all rented together for three and a half weeks after their wedding.

Heisuke continued to hear the term jailbait until he met a young girl in the modeling industry who was a year younger than him. Then the other Baka Trio members began calling him a cradle robber. He and the young lady broke it off after just under a year.

Harada never settled down, complaining that girls were too different from back home. His problem was that he compared all the girls he met to the girls he knew and found them lacking. None were as smart as Shukke, as funny as Cat, as cute as Stacy, as loving as Ryane or as kind as Chizuru.

Hijikata and Chizuru got married in a private and traditional ceremony that they traveled to Kyoto for. Sen-hime was in attendance. Shortly thereafter she and Kazama formed a formal agreement between themselves.

14Phantom beat LastLivingVampire in the battles. They fought the Oni Complex in terms of bestselling songs at the time of Ryane's rebirth.

Kondou continues to run Shieikan which was doing well enough that when Ryane returned they were able to rebuild Umarekawaru and Flowers and Water. They now fight each other for number one songs.

It took Ryane's soul nine and a half years to be reborn. Hajime proposed the moment she opened her eyes the second day and for onceâ€¦they weren't interrupted.

* * *

><p>Well to be honest when I started this I had planned it differently. But when I write I get carried away and things didn't go as planned. I couldn't find a way, without some great tragedy to end the hate and anger directed by religious zealots at the two primary couples, so I figured...this is it.

As some of you may have figured out through the course of reading this, or in other cases where I have actually told people... Cat, Shukke, and Stacy are all real friends of mine, though Shukke-nee told me if I used her real name she would kill me so I used her wow name. The ways we met in the story are true to real life, though I never got into how me and Stacy met...She would not be happy with me if I said. So that's why Ryane, the character named and based after me, had to die. Couldn't kill my besties and all.

I want to thank anyone who has read this, commented on this and/or enjoyed this. Reading your comments was great, and when someone would say "Cat is great" or something like that my friends really enjoyed it too!

And I am sorry this is such an abrupt ending. Truly I am. Thank you for reading it though. With much love and heartfelt gratitude

~Ryane.

End
file.